

Staying Active As You Age

When asked what they consider to be major factors in maintaining a good quality of life as they grow older, people rank living independently and remaining active right at the top. But it is important to get active so that you can stay active.

Exercise

What can exercise do for me?

As you age, you lose muscle and bone mass and may develop problems in your muscles, joints, and bones, such as back pain, osteoarthritis, or osteoporosis. Regular exercise slows the loss of muscle mass, strengthens bones, and reduces joint and muscle pain. In addition, mobility and balance are improved, which reduces the risk of falling and suffering a serious injury, such as a hip fracture.

Don't you need to exercise long and hard to get any benefits from physical activity?

Scientists used to think that strenuous exercise was the only way to improve your health. However, new research suggests that just 30 minutes of moderate physical activity, such as a brisk walk or washing your car, provides most of the health benefits from exercise. The activity doesn't have to be too vigorous. In fact, moderate intensity is best, but even low-intensity activity is better than nothing. While some people may enjoy participating in a regularly scheduled exercise class, others may find it easier to just increase their daily activities.

The key is to find something that you enjoy doing and do it regularly.

- Go for a brisk walk
- Work in the yard
- Go for a bike ride
- Walk the fairways when you golf
- Wash and wax your car

I'm getting older. It seems like it's too late to start exercising. Would I really benefit?

It's never too late to start. Physical activity is especially important for older adults, and can help them live independently for as long as possible. A study of frail, wheelchair-bound nursing home residents in their 80s and 90s who participated in a weight lifting program showed marked improvement in their strength and overall functional ability. Staying active also lowers your risk of heart disease or heart attack, lowers blood pressure, controls diabetes and helps you maintain a healthy weight level.

But I have a chronic medical condition. Won't physical activity make it worse?

It's just the opposite. If you have a chronic condition affecting your muscles, joints, or bones, lack of physical activity can make the condition worse, or at least make it more difficult to live with. Medical research shows that physical activity is both safe and beneficial for people with arthritis, osteoporosis, and other chronic conditions of bones and joints.

Back Pain

I suffer from back pain. Won't exercise make it worse?

You shouldn't exercise during an acute bout of back pain, but by strengthening the muscles of your stomach, hips, and thighs, you can relieve chronic back pain and prevent your condition from getting worse. A balanced fitness program of regular physical activity and specific strengthening exercises is ideal.

What should I do?

During times of acute back pain, hold off on strenuous exercise, but get up and move around. Prolonged bed rest and inactivity will delay your recovery.

Stay in good physical condition by running, walking, swimming, bicycle riding, or weight lifting. Use the correct lifting techniques to move objects. Maintain proper body weight.

Osteoarthritis

I've been told I have "arthritis." What exactly does that mean?

While there are many types of arthritis, the most common form of this bone and joint condition is osteoarthritis. It is the leading cause of disability in people over the age of 55. Although the cause is unknown, the pain of osteoarthritis is caused by the deterioration of the cartilage and underlying bone in the joints.

When I try to walk or do other exercises, and particularly when I go up and down stairs, I feel pain in my joints. I'm afraid more exercise will cause more damage.

Just the opposite is true. Any type of exercise will strengthen joints and the surrounding muscles. It also will relieve joint stiffness and reduce pain. Inactivity can aggravate the problem because weak muscles around the joints can lead to joint instability.

If one type of exercise causes pain, try another exercise. You might try swimming or walking in a pool until your muscles are strong enough to try walking on a firm surface.

Start with short, frequent sessions of physical activity. Remember, exercise also can help control other conditions, such as high blood pressure and diabetes.

Osteoporosis

I have been told that I may have osteoporosis. How serious is this problem?

Osteoporosis is a major contributor of bone fractures in older people, particularly postmenopausal women. It is a major public health problem, affecting more than 200 million people worldwide and 25 million Americans.

Because I have osteoporosis, shouldn't I avoid exercise to protect my bones and avoid a fracture?

Weight-bearing exercises, such as walking, jogging, and weight lifting can stimulate bone growth and make your bones healthier. Regular exercise also will help you maintain good balance so that you are less likely to fall and suffer a disabling bone fracture. About 345,000 people were hospitalized in 2003 with hip fractures. (Source: National Center for Health Statistics; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2003 National Hospital Discharge Survey).

What else can I do?

Stimulating bone growth and preventing bone loss through exercise should be part of your lifestyle because once you stop, the benefits begin to diminish in two weeks and disappear in two to eight months. Your doctor can help with a total plan for the treatment and prevention of osteoporosis, including calcium, medications, and hormone replacement for older women.

Total Joint Replacement

I have had a total hip replacement and have been told by my physician to be careful so I will not damage it. What kind of activities will not damage my prosthesis or total joint replacement?

While you are recovering, follow the graduated walking program and specific exercises prescribed by your orthopaedic surgeon or physical therapist to restore movement and strengthen the muscles and ligaments surrounding the prosthesis.

After you are fully recovered, participate in daily activities, such as walking, bicycling, swimming, golf, moderate hiking, and ballroom dancing to maintain the strength and mobility of your new joint.

Talk to your physician before engaging in activities such as jogging, skiing, or tennis.

Is it dangerous to exercise after having a total joint replacement?

Normal, healthy levels of activity will not damage your prosthesis or joint replacement. In fact, to take full advantage of the surgery, you must stay active for the rest of your life. If you aren't active, your muscles will weaken, which will increase your risk of falling. Falls are a leading cause of repeat surgeries.

- **Exercise makes you feel good.** Regular exercise can reduce stress and give you a more positive outlook on life. The reason people exercise regularly is that "it makes you feel good."
- **Moderate physical activity works.** It's a myth that to be physically fit you have to exercise hard for long periods of time. Experts agree that physical activity doesn't have to be vigorous to improve your health. The key is to feel your lungs, heart, and muscles working harder, but not too hard.
- **It all adds up.** Physicians recommend at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity daily, or on most days of the week. You don't need to be active for 30 minutes at a time. The 30 minutes can be broken up into shorter periods. It all adds up.
- **Keep it fun and interesting.** The activity could be walking, swimming, weight lifting, bicycling, or golf. Housework, gardening, dancing, even playing with your grandchildren, count as physical activity. Select the activities you like.

- **Do different activities on different days.** One morning you might spend 15 minutes working in the garden, followed by a 15-minute walk in the afternoon. The next day you might play a round of golf and later swim a few laps in a pool. Keep it fun and interesting.

Don't Fear Pain

Many people with problems of swelling and stiffness of the bones, joints, tendons and other unspecified aches and pains avoid physical activity because they fear pain.

You can expect to experience some muscle soreness when you start exercising, but it will disappear as you exercise regularly. Start out slowly. If one activity hurts too much, switch to something else. Of course, stop what you're doing if you experience severe pain or swelling.

Your orthopaedic surgeon or physical therapist can recommend exercises to help ease your discomfort. Focus on fitness utilizing varied, daily physical activities that you enjoy.

Last reviewed and updated: October 2007

AAOS does not review or endorse accuracy or effectiveness of materials, treatments or physicians.