

Getting Older, Staying In Shape

Q: As I get older, does it really matter to stay physically active?

A: Absolutely. No matter your health and physical abilities, you can gain a lot by staying active. There are many benefits from physical activity:

- maintains and improves your physical strength and fitness.
- improves your ability to do the everyday things you want to do.
- improves your balance.
- manages and improves diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and osteoporosis.
- reduces feelings of depression and may improve mood and overall well-being.
- improves your ability to shift quickly between tasks, plan an activity, and stay focused.

If you feel out of shape--but want to remain physically active--the key to success is to build up slowly from your current fitness level, according to the National Institute On Aging.

The place to start is to determine your fitness level. Begin by asking these questions:

- How much time do you spend sitting?
- How much time and how often are you active?
- When you're active, what kinds of activities are you doing?

Here are 5 ways you can test your own fitness:

- measure your endurance by picking a fixed course—once around the block or from one end of the mall to the other. Time how long it takes you to walk it.
- Test your upper-body strength by how many arm curls you can do safely in 2 minutes.
- Test your lower-body strength by how many times you can stand from a seated position safely in 2 minutes.
- Test your balance by seeing how long you can safely stand on one foot. (Stand next to something sturdy that you can hold onto if you lose your balance.)
- Test your flexibility by sitting toward the front of a sturdy chair, and stretching one leg straight out in front of you with your heel on the floor and your toes pointing up.

Bend the other leg and place your foot flat on the floor. Slowly bend from your hips and reach as far as you can toward the toes of your outstretched foot. How far can you reach before you feel a stretch?

Write down your results. If these exercises were hard to do, just do what's comfortable and slowly build up. If they were easy, you know your level of fitness is higher. You can be more ambitious and challenge yourself. You can do these simple fitness tests once a month, and measure your progress at each session.

Muscle soreness lasting a few days and slight fatigue are normal after doing muscle-building exercises, at least at first. After doing these exercises for a few weeks, you will probably not be sore after your workout. For some exercises, you may want to start alternating arms and work your way up to using both arms at the same time. Breathe out as you lift or push, and breathe in as you relax. Don't hold your breath during strength exercises. Holding your breath while straining can cause changes in blood pressure. Breathe in slowly through your nose and breathe out slowly through your mouth. Talk with your doctor if you are unsure about doing a particular exercise, especially if you've had hip or back surgery.

Safety during exercises is always important. Walk during the day or in well-lit areas at night, and be aware of your surroundings. To prevent injuries, be sure to use safety equipment. If you are exercising outdoors, dress in layers so you can add or remove clothes if you get cold or hot. Drink plenty of liquids when doing any activity that makes you sweat. Before and after you exercise, do a little light activity to warm up and cool down.

Each year, more than two million older Americans go to the emergency room because of fall-related injuries. You can learn exercises that will improve your balance and make you steadier on your feet. You can see pictures and short videos of any of these exercises, plus get more fitness tips by going to the National Institute On Aging website: <https://go4life.nia.nih.gov/exercises>.