

Exercising to Prevent a Stroke

Exercise helps lower high blood pressure, which is an important risk factor for stroke. Exercise can help you control other things that put you at risk, such as obesity, high cholesterol and diabetes.

Exercise to lower your risk of stroke

It is important to exercise regularly. Do activities that raise your heart rate. Try to do at least 2½ hours a week of moderate exercise. One way to do this is to be active 30 minutes a day, at least 5 days a week. Or try to do vigorous activity at least 1¼ hours a week. Start slowly and gradually build up your exercise program.

Moderate activity is safe for most people, but it's always a good idea to talk with your doctor before you start an exercise program. You can use your target heart rate to figure out how hard to exercise.

Low-intensity exercise, if done daily, also can have some long-term health benefits and lower the risk for heart problems that may lead to stroke. Low-intensity exercises have a lower risk of injury and are recommended for people with other health problems. Some low-intensity activities are:

- Walking
- Gardening and other yard work
- Housework
- Dancing

Exercise to prevent another stroke

If you have already had a stroke, ask your doctor what type and level of activity is safe for you. Your doctor may recommend ½ to 1½ hours a week of moderate exercise. One way to do this is to be active 30 minutes a day, 1 to 3 days a week.

If you are in a stroke rehab program, your rehab team can make an exercise program that is right for you.

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Fitness: Getting and Staying Active

What is fitness?

Fitness means being able to perform physical activity. It also means having the energy and strength to feel as good as possible. Getting more fit, even a little bit, can improve your health.

You don't have to be an athlete to be fit. A brisk half-hour walk every day can help you reach a good level of fitness. And if this is hard for you, you can work toward a level of fitness that helps you feel better and have more energy.

What are the benefits of fitness?

Fitness helps you feel better and have more energy for work and leisure time. You'll feel more able to do things like playing with your grandkids, gardening, dancing or biking.

When you stay active and fit, you burn more calories, even when you're at rest. Being fit lets you do more physical activity. And it lets you exercise harder without as much work. It can also help you manage your weight.

Improving your fitness is good for your heart, lungs, bones, muscles, and joints. And it lowers your risk for falls, heart attack, diabetes, high blood pressure, and some cancers. If you already have one or more of these problems, getting more fit may help you control other health problems and make you feel better.

Being more fit also can help you to sleep better, handle stress better, and keep your mind sharp.

How much physical activity do you need for health-related fitness?

Experts say your goal should be one, or a combination, of these:

- Do some sort of moderate aerobic activity, like brisk walking, for at least 2½ hours each week. It is up to you how many days you want to exercise, but it is best to be active at least 3 days a week. Be active for at least 10 minutes at a time. For example, you could:
 - Take a 10-minute walk 3 times a day. Do this 5 days a week.
 - Take a half-hour walk 3 days a week. On the other 4 days take a 15-minute walk.
 - Take a 45-minute walk every other day.
- Or do more vigorous activities, like running, for at least 1¼ hours a week. This activity makes you breathe harder and have a much faster heartbeat than when you are resting. You can spread out these 75 minutes any way you want to. It is better to be active at least 3 days a week for at least 10 minutes at a time. For example, you could:
 - Run for 25 minutes 3 times a week.
 - Run for 15 minutes 5 times a week.

Here's an easy way to tell if your exercise is moderate: You're at a moderate level of activity if you can talk but not sing during the activity. If you can't talk while you're doing the activity, you're working too hard.

What types of physical activity improve fitness?

The activities you choose depend on which kind of fitness you want to improve. There are three different kinds of fitness:

- **Aerobic fitness** makes you breathe faster and makes your heart work harder for a while. Aerobic activities include walking, running, cycling, and swimming. Aerobic fitness is also called cardio or cardiovascular training.
- **Muscle fitness** (strength) means building stronger muscles and increasing how long you can use them. Activities like weight lifting and push-ups can improve your muscular fitness.
- **Flexibility** is the ability to move your joints and muscles through their full range of motion. Stretching is an exercise that helps you to be more flexible.

How can you be more physically active?

Moderate physical activity is safe for most people. But it's always a good idea to talk to your doctor before becoming more active, especially if you haven't been very active or have health problems.

If you're ready to add more physical activity to your life, here are some tips to get you started:

- **Make physical activity part of your regular day.** Make a regular habit of using stairs, not elevators, and walking to do errands near your home.
- **Start walking.** Walking is a great fitness activity that most people can start doing. Make it a habit to take a daily walk with family members, friends, coworkers, or pets.
- **Find an activity partner.** This can make exercising more fun.
- **Find an activity that you enjoy,** and stay with it. Vary it with other activities so you don't get bored.

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Physical Activity as You Get Older

It's never too late to start getting active. Being fit is important for everyone. You can benefit from physical activity even if you think of yourself as "elderly" or you already have conditions such as arthritis or heart disease. Being more active will help you feel better and may even help you live longer.

If you haven't been active for a long time, you may have no idea where to start. The important thing is to take that first step—and make that first step a small one.

Be smart about exercise

- Talk to your doctor before you start a fitness program, especially if you are older or worried about how exercise might affect your health. You may have health problems that limit what you can do.
- Don't overdo it! If it hurts, stop. Some minor soreness or stiffness is to be expected at first, but pain is a warning sign to stop.
- If you have been inactive for years, start with about 5 to 10 minutes of activity at a time, and increase your time as you get more comfortable with the activity.
- Try to improve only a little bit at a time. Pick one area for improvement first. Set your personal goal in that area, and meet the goal before trying another area.

Being active can make life better

Many people become less active as they age, but staying active—or getting active, if you aren't already—has definite benefits.

- **Aerobic exercise** strengthens your heart—which improves your health—and gives you more energy to do the things you like to do. It can also increase the amount of sleep you get at night and may reduce the time it takes for you to fall asleep. Water exercise may be a good choice for some older adults.
- **Strengthening exercises** can help you maintain your muscle, strengthen bones, and protect knees and other joints. These exercises include resistance training, such as lifting weights.
- **Flexibility and stretching** – which help provide a full range of motion for muscles and joints – can help you function at home, at work, and socially. Everyday tasks that are hard for you, such as tying shoelaces or reaching to a shelf, may become easier. When you stay flexible, you also keep a more natural walking pattern and decrease your chance of falling. Most flexibility that seems to be lost through aging is caused not by aging but by inactivity or lack of movement.

- **Balance exercises** help you have good posture. They can also be helpful to improve coordination and reduce your risk for falls. One type of balance exercise is to stand on one leg for 10 seconds. Stand on a flat surface and use a stable object (such as a heavy chair) for support. Yoga classes or DVDs can teach you poses that help improve your balance.

Being active can keep you healthy

Exercise also has these specific health benefits for older adults.

- Improves blood pressure.
- Improves heart failure symptoms and shortens hospital stays.
- Improves cholesterol.
- Helps keep postmenopausal women from losing bone density.
- Helps joints work better, with less pain, in osteoarthritis.
- Improves sleep and reduces fatigue.
- Helps your brain work better and improves short-term memory.
- May lower the risk of some cancers.
- Lowers the risk of:
 - Hip and spinal fractures
 - Falling
 - Coronary artery disease
 - Diabetes
 - Depression
 - Obesity

Physical activity doesn't have to be strenuous. Older adults can gain great health benefits with a moderate amount of physical activity. This can be done in longer sessions of moderately intense activities (such as walking) or in shorter sessions of more vigorous activities (such as fast walking or stair-walking).

Warning signs for older adults

When you exercise, it's normal to have some minor muscle and joint soreness. But other signs may point to something more serious. Stop exercising if you think you might be having a heart attack. Call 911 right away. Symptoms include pain, pressure, or a strange feeling in your chest, back, neck, jaw, or upper belly, or in one or both shoulders or arms.

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Quick Tips: Staying Active in Cold Weather

Get started

There are plenty of ways to be active in fall and winter, even if the weather turns cold. You can stay in shape and have fun while you're at it. Here are some ideas:

Indoors

- Go for walks at the mall with a friend. Local schools and churches may have indoor gyms where you can walk. You may want to use a phone app or pedometer to count your steps. This will help motivate you to walk more.
- Get some hand weights or stretch bands to use at home for resistance exercise. You can get fit while you watch your favorite TV show or listen to music. Try doing a little more each week. Use cans of food if you don't want to buy weights.
- Use an online exercise video or a smartphone app. This can be a fun way to stay in shape at home.
- Take the stairs and fit in walk breaks whenever you can. This will give you extra activity, even on a busy day.
- Do active housework like sweeping, mopping, vacuuming, doing laundry, or washing the windows. You can stay active while you keep your home looking good.
- Join a gym or health club. You can use machines like treadmills, stair-climbers, or exercise bikes. Try a fitness class or a new indoor activity, like dancing or water aerobics. Many cities have community centers that offer affordable fitness classes.
- Get involved in sports leagues in your community or at work. Many cities offer indoor sports like basketball, volleyball, indoor soccer, or swimming.

Outdoors

- Rake leaves or do other yard work.
- Bundle up, and take the dog for a walk. This can help you make walks part of your daily routine.
- Shovel snow. This can be great winter exercise. But if you have heart problems or other health concerns, be sure to ask your doctor if shoveling snow is okay. Overdoing it can put dangerous strain on your body.
- Try a new winter activity like skating, cross-country skiing, or snowshoeing. When you do outdoor activities in less populated areas, be sure to plan ahead. Let people know where you will be, and take the right gear for the conditions.

Dress for cold weather

If you plan to be active outdoors, wear clothes that fit well and keep you warm and dry. For protection, it's best to wear:

- A warm hat. If it's very cold, you also may want to wear covering for your face, such as a scarf.
- Layers of clothing to keep you warm. Wear waterproof outer layers to keep you dry.
- Clothing made of wool or polypropylene. These will keep you from losing body heat even if the fabric gets wet. Don't wear cotton.
- Wool socks and waterproof shoes. Socks and shoes should fit closely but not too tight.
- Mittens rather than gloves. This way, your fingers are together so you can roll them into a fist for warmth.

Be safe

Check with your doctor before you start a new activity if:

- You have heart problems or other health issues.
- You have not been active in a long time.

Be sure to stop and call your doctor if you have chest pain or feel dizzy during any physical activity. If you have breathing problems like asthma or COPD, ask your doctor before being active in cold weather.

To stay safe, try to do your walking and other activities when it's light out. Use your lunch break, or do family activities when the kids get out of school. If it's dark out, walk with a partner.

Be careful not to slip on wet or icy ground. You can buy "grippers" for your shoes to help keep you from slipping. Avoid outdoor activity in extreme cold, and take the windchill into account.

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