



Young at heart ... and mind ... and body

Exercise has many benefits for seniors

By Emily Harris

You already know that exercise is important to your health. But did you know that 34 percent of the age 50-plus population is sedentary? Or that if you're 50 or older and don't exercise, you increase your chances for ill health later in life?

Four out of 10 Americans between the ages of 45 and 64 are sedentary, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. This number increases to six out of 10 for those 75 and older, the AARP website says.

Fitness is important at any age. If you weren't fit in your younger years, maybe now is the time to increase your activity level. Yes, creating a fitness routine is a challenge. We often know what we should do but are stymied by putting it into practice. Here, we'll break down fitness to the nuts and bolts, with a look at what it means and how you can achieve it.

There are two parts to staying fit: physical activity and mental activity. Scientists have found that many of the changes associated with aging are related to inactivity. It is important to engage your body and brain in activities that you enjoy.

Designing a fitness program

How do you come up with a plan? These five steps will make it easy to get going.

Start with an assessment. This might be as simple as talking to your physician, who can recommend a plan of action, such as walking, or you might visit a local gym and take the full spectrum of body composition tests.

Step two involves setting goals and a little bit of writing. Do you want to lose a little weight? Do you want to be able to walk a mile in less than 10 minutes? Do you want to keep up with your great-grandchild? It's helpful to write goals down in a notebook. Consider your likes and dislikes and how much time you have for fitness. Many experts, including those at the Mayo Clinic, suggest that you schedule your exercise on a calendar. If you have a workout buddy, you make the date with them. Either approach keeps you committed. Shoot for 30 minutes of exercise a day—that gives you something to build up to.

Step two also involves the details of your plan. By deciding what you like, you can determine the best activities for yourself. If you're a social person, you may benefit from a class. Many gyms offer water and studio classes geared to all age groups as well as classes strictly for seniors that offer social interaction and exercise.

Step three is easy: Assemble your gear. If you've joined a gym, you'll find everything you need there—though you may want to get a heart rate monitor. If you've decided on a walking routine, you'll need good sneakers and a pedometer to count your steps. If the water is calling you, you'll need a swimsuit and maybe goggles, a swim cap and sunscreen.

Step four: Go. Remember to take it slowly as you begin. Listen to your body. If something hurts, don't force it.

The final step is to track your progress in your notebook or online. Post your progress on the refrigerator. You should be proud of all that hard work.

Are you a joiner?

If you're a social person, a group setting may be ideal. SilverSneakers is a national program that focuses on cardiovascular and muscular strength. The program was founded in 1992 and is offered by leading Medicare health plans and Medicare Supplement carriers at no extra cost.

"SilverSneakers is a wonderful program," says Kara Loggins, health and fitness director at the Hartley Drive Family YMCA in High Point, N.C. Loggins' YMCA offers four classes a week: two days focus on cardio and two days on muscular strength. Participants sit in chairs during the workout, getting up a few times throughout the 45-minute classes to stretch or ramp up their heart rates. The strength class uses dumbbells and resistance balls, and a bit of banter between the instructor and participants keeps things interesting.

The program provides users with a membership at the participating gym, access to other SilverSneakers gyms when the member is traveling, customized classes, health education seminars and a trained senior fitness adviser. If your local facility doesn't offer

SilverSneakers, it may offer something similar, such as Anti-Aging or Young At Heart classes. These classes are designed to get you moving and focus on flexibility, fitness and strength.

If you're more of a pool person, why not try water aerobics? Water acts as a buffer to eliminate the impact you would experience in studio classes. Water barbells and dumbbells are used to increase resistance and give you a complete workout. This might be an ideal workout option if you have arthritis. Some gyms offer classes geared to members with arthritis or recovering from injuries or surgeries.

Another lower-impact option is studio cycling. However, cycling is high-intensity, so consult your physician before giving it a try.

If dancing is your thing, why not try that? There are plenty of national dance studios that offer group and individual lessons in swing, shag and ballroom styles.



Not a class person?

There are options if you prefer to work out alone, too. You can walk inside (at the local mall or on a track) or in your neighborhood, hit the pool to swim or aqua jog, or go for a bike ride.

If you want to work out at home, you might want to buy a few fitness videos and equipment such as weights and resistance bands. You can find DVDs or videos at Wal-Mart and Target or online from Collage Video (www.collagevideo.com/seniors-exercises-videos-dvds/fitness-workouts.aspx)

Again, remember to follow the steps and track your progress.

A little help from your friends

Involving others in your plans makes them aware of your goals and commitment to achieving them, according to the AARP's website. By creating a support network, be it of family members, church or like-minded fitness friends, you only increase your chances of success.

The AARP offers these tips to make your buddy system work:

- **Planning:** Choose the time and location of your workout and schedule it.
- **Accountability:** Commit to each other to show up and stick to your activity plan.
- **Mixing it up:** To avoid boredom and continue challenging yourself, try changing your path, lengthening your workout, or building the intensity. Choose a new activity or combine a few.

10,000 steps a day

Sure, that sounds like a lot of walking. But, if you're an active adult, you're probably getting in more than that. Hey, if you play golf and walk the course, you're definitely walking more than five miles. Maybe you should wear a pedometer to see where you fall.

Walking is easy, open the door and go, so why not join or start a walking program? The AARP offers these tips: advertise the club, organize with a meeting where you discuss goals and plans, then you meet and walk.

If you don't want to start a club, walk with your spouse or a neighbor, or a neighbor's dog. Just start moving—you'll feel better. ■