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Exercise is key to preventing muscle loss.

You gain a lot of things with age—wisdom, experience, perspective—but physical strength isn't one of them. Age-related muscle loss begins [around age 40](#) and most people lose an average of one to two percent of muscle mass every year after age 50. Loss of strength may decline at an even greater rate of [12 to 15 percent](#) during each decade that follows.

There's good news, though. You still have the power to prevent some of that muscle loss, which is important to your overall health. Maintaining lean muscle helps keep your metabolism running smoothly which can help you maintain a healthy weight. Muscle is also essential for performing everyday activities like carrying groceries or walking upstairs. Not only that, it keeps you safe—age-related muscle loss can also put you at risk for dangerous falls.

There are many reasons why aging and muscle loss go hand in hand, with natural changes in hormone levels topping the list. Serious and chronic illnesses also become more common with age, and facing one or more makes it harder to maintain strength. People who have a chronic illness like diabetes may lose muscle at a faster rate, and you can also be prone to muscle loss if you've been sidelined by ailments like lung disease, heart disease, arthritis, or cancer.

Protein Power

Age-related muscle loss may seem inevitable, but the truth is that there's a lot you can do to fight back against it. You can slow and even reverse some muscle loss by making some simple lifestyle changes. The key steps, as you might guess, involve diet and exercise.

To start, protein equals power. Your body takes protein from the foods you eat and breaks it down into amino acids that help build muscle, so eating plenty of protein-rich foods is crucial. Currently, the recommended daily allowance set by the National Institutes of Health is [0.80 g per kg of body weight](#) per day—so about 65 g of protein per day if you weigh 180 pounds. If you're looking to build muscle rather than just preserve it, you may need more than that.

If you're not sure how much protein you need, or you're concerned that you're falling short, talk to your doctor or nutritionist. They can help you tweak your diet, or let you know if you should add a [protein supplement](#) to the mix.

Get Working

Exercise is an essential component of any muscle-building plan. While cardio activities like walking and swimming are great for your heart and overall health, building and preserving muscle calls for strength training. Set a goal to slowly and steadily get stronger by lifting weights, using resistance tools (like bands), or practicing body weight exercises.

Strength training has bonus benefits as well. It's been shown to reduce the risk of osteoporosis, chronic illness, heart disease, and even depression.

If you're not already active, talk to your doctor to make sure you're healthy enough for exercise and whether there are

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any types you need to avoid. Once you get the green light, remember to start slow. Depending on your current level of strength, you might want to start by picking up some resistance bands, [light hand weights](#), or [dumbbells](#). If you want to kick it up a notch, consider hiring a personal trainer or talking to a professional at your local gym for at least a session or two so you can learn more about how to safely incorporate strength-training into your routine.

By Barbara Brody

Sources:

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These articles are not a substitute for medical advice, and are not intended to treat or cure any disease. Advances in medicine may cause this information to become outdated, invalid, or subject to debate. Professional opinions and interpretations of scientific literature may vary. Consult your healthcare professional before making changes to your diet, exercise, or medication regime.

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