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Healthy Living



5 Things to Do in Your 50s to Be Active at 80

Research shows a few key midlife steps really pay off in how well you age decades down the road

by Barbara Brody, [AARP \(http://www.aarp.org\)](http://www.aarp.org), June 2, 2021 | Comments: 19

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Aging researchers used to focus purely on longevity. Now that it's no longer unusual to live into your 80s or even 90s, the emphasis has shifted. "People may live longer but not be in good health," says Robert Mankowski, assistant professor at the University of Florida Health College of Medicine Institute of Aging. "We're not really interested in extending life span; we're more interested in extending healthspan."

If you're currently in your 50s, you might not be terribly concerned about how you'll feel decades from now. That's a mistake, because your body is already changing. At midlife, muscle mass starts declining (people lose, on average, around 5 percent after age 30), as does bone density. Meanwhile, your

metabolism slows and it becomes easier to put on weight, especially around your abdomen. The combination of extra pounds and less muscle can make it harder for you to maintain good balance (<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003998.htm>), and your joints might start to feel stiffer, too.

The good news? You can counteract nearly every one of these physiological shifts by taking some relatively simple steps — especially if you get started right now.

1. Get your baseline numbers

If you're overdue for a physical, schedule one ASAP. The yearly checkup plus routine blood work is the best way to get your hands on the must-know numbers (<https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/diabetes/prevention--treatment-of-diabetes/know-your-health-numbers>) — including your blood sugar, blood pressure, cholesterol and weight. Keeping tabs on these key stats helps you dodge or monitor type 2 diabetes and heart disease, two extremely common conditions in older adults.

For those who hope to remain as active as long as possible as they age, a few other tests may be in order. Consider getting a scale that measures your body composition, says Mankowski. While these gadgets aren't super precise, they'll provide a rough estimate of your fat and muscle mass that you can use to monitor your progress as you step up your exercise game. (More on that shortly.) For similar reasons, he also advises checking your gait speed by timing yourself (or having a trainer do it) to learn how far you're able to walk in six minutes (<https://www.lung.org/lung-health-diseases/lung-procedures-and-tests/six-minute-walk-test>).

2. Just move more

Whether you're a gym rat or a couch potato, aiming to be a little more active every day (</health/healthy-living/info-2020/value-of-short-workouts.html>) is one of the most important steps you can take. Not only does research show a direct line with midlife exercise and longevity, but “exercise in our 50s is crucial and vital for later on in life because of one word in particular — independence,” says Damien Joyner, an ACE-certified personal trainer, active aging specialist, and founder of Incremental Fitness (<https://incrementalfit.com/>). “Independence means being able to carry out everyday life activities with little to no help. We need to be able to do chores, pick up groceries, lift things and put them somewhere else. As we age, we should not have to avoid stairs, curbs, uneven surfaces, or other natural or man-made physical obstacles we have in our daily lives.”

Any increase from your current activity level is worthwhile, but if you're not currently logging at least 150 minutes a week (<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/fitness/expert-answers/exercise/faq-20057916>) of moderate activity, then you should strive to make that your goal. From there, high-intensity interval training (HIIT) — which entails alternating short bouts of intense activity, like running, with slower-paced movement, like walking — is an especially good choice: Research from the Mayo Clinic found that it helps muscles produce more energy as well as promotes the growth of new muscle, especially as you get older.



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While following a structured routine can help promote consistency and accountability (especially if you exercise with a trainer or workout buddy), don't discount the benefits of incorporating other forms of movement into your day. Walking, golfing, kayaking and gardening all count.

3. Cut back on sugar and salt

Remember when seeing “fat-free” on a box of cookies meant it was OK to eat the entire package? Hopefully you now know that fat is only part of the puzzle when it comes to controlling your waistline and reducing your risk of obesity-related diseases like heart disease and type 2 diabetes. While it's still smart to limit your intake of unhealthy (saturated) fat, keeping your sugar intake in check (</health/healthy-living/info-12-2012/hidden-sugar-quiz.html#quest1>) is equally important, says Mankowski. “We need carbohydrates, but not necessarily processed sugars,” which end up turning into fat in the body, he says.

Too much sodium is also problematic, says Sandra Arevalo, a dietician and spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. “As we age, blood pressure has a tendency to start going up,” she explains. “If we continue eating the same amount of salt, we're making our heart work harder.” Her advice: Choose fewer processed foods (</health/healthy-living/info-2020/nutrition-after-age-50.html>) (which are often laden with salt) and rely more heavily on herbs and spices when you're cooking. Turmeric, ginger, cinnamon, onions and garlic are just some of the seasonings that can add salt-free flavor to your meals. They also contain potent antioxidants that protect your heart and may lower your risk of cancer.

4. Focus on bone health

It's probably too soon for a bone scan (<https://www.choosingwisely.org/patient-resources/bone-density-tests/>) — most women should have one at 65; men should ask their doctors if they need one after 70. But your 50s are the perfect time to make lifestyle changes aimed at strengthening your skeleton. You start to lose bone mass after age 50 as the breakdown of bone cells begins outpacing the rate at which new bone is formed.

Osteoporosis can threaten your mobility because it puts you at high risk for breaking a bone, and a late-in-life fracture can be debilitating. It can also mess with your posture, making you appear hunched over. Calcium intake is key, says Arevalo, but watch the milk: Digestive enzymes decrease starting in your 40s, so lactose (the sugar found in milk) can become difficult to break down. You'll also want to go easy on full-fat cheese, because it's high in saturated fat.

A better pick: low-fat yogurt, which is rich in gut-friendly probiotics as well as calcium, vitamin D (necessary for calcium absorption) and protein (useful to combat age-related muscle loss). “It's really good to eat a yogurt a day to maintain good digestion and calcium intake,” she says.

Exercise is crucial for strong bones, too, especially the weight-bearing variety, which entails working against the resistance of your own body weight. Try walking, hiking, tennis or anything else that gets you on your feet.

5. Prioritize strength training

Research from Duke University (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6075535/>) has found that simple strength-related activities — like being able to stand on one leg or [get up from a chair](/health/healthy-living/info-2021/strength-balance-moves.html) — often start becoming more difficult as early as your 50s, but you can fight back. Whether you use free weights, a weight machine, resistance bands or even your own body (think planks, push-ups and squats), strength-training has myriad benefits — including building muscle mass, increasing your metabolism and making your bones stronger. Health experts advise doing some sort of strengthening exercise [at least twice a week](https://www.health.harvard.edu/exercise-and-fitness/7-tips-for-a-safe-and-successful-strength-training-program).

The best strength-training routine is a well-rounded one that mirrors things you regularly do — and want to keep doing — so making sure you work every major muscle group (legs, hips, back, chest, abdomen, shoulder and arms) is key. If you're new to strength work, start with one set of eight to 15 repetitions for each muscle group and try to work up to two to three sets twice a week.

"Strength is a part of everyday life," says Joyner. "We have to pick things up and put them places. We get up out of a seated position, often with something in our hands. Pulling open stubborn refrigerator doors, putting luggage in the overhead bin, or carrying laundry all call for strength."

There are many [different ways to engage](/health/healthy-living/info-2019/strength-training.html) in strength training, including using dumbbells, resistance bands and barbells. If you're not sure where to start, schedule a session with a certified fitness trainer who can show you the basics.

"When individuals are strong and able to move themselves and things well, they will continue to be independent," says Joyner. "Exercise now for that future you. The 70-year-old you will thank the 50-year-old you for being vigilant right now."

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