

by Dr. Michael Jordan

Stay Fit, Age Well

Staying active yields health benefits no matter what your age, but it is an especially important preventive measure as we get older. The ideal goal for any person is to achieve lifelong fitness.

As a sports medicine physician, I see many patients who experience activity-related pain or medical conditions later in life that may have been avoided with a commitment to fitness earlier on.

Maintenance Pays Off

The sooner you make regular activity a priority, the better. Older adults still have the opportunity to substantially improve their health through exercise, but what you do as a young adult directly impacts your future physical well-being.

The current American College of Sports Medicine guidelines advocate 30 minutes of moderate physical activity at least five times a week, or 20 minutes of more vigorous activity three times a week. Meeting or exceeding this level of activity lowers your risk for heart disease, stroke, osteoporosis and many other conditions.

It's important to note that physical activity can mean many different things for different people. Take some time to explore a variety of activities and try to find something you are truly passionate about. If you enjoy what you're doing, you will be more likely to engage in that activity on a regular basis. Before starting any new exercise program, it is important to consult your doctor, especially for older adults.

Exercising Safely

When we're young, we think we're invincible, right? Not when it comes to maintaining the health of our joints. If we don't exercise safely, we put ourselves at risk for injuries that may never recover to pre-injury levels. A common example of a healthy activity in which safety is paramount is spinning, a high-intensity indoor cycling class. Spinning is a great cardio workout which can benefit your heart and lungs, but done improperly, it can be detrimental to your knees. Like many other activities, proper form in spinning is essential to injury prevention.

Whenever using a new piece of fitness

equipment, be sure you have it adjusted properly for your body. Enlist the help of a trainer, fitness instructor or medical provider if you are unsure how to do so.

Another important point about safety is not returning to activity too soon after an injury. As difficult as it can be to "take it easy," returning to exercise before you are healed will only prolong the period of rest needed, and put you at risk for re-injury, or worse, a more severe injury in the future.

Boning Up Your Fitness Routine

Regular activity can fend off a number of conditions, one of the most preventable of these is osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is often viewed as a senior citizens' disease, but the truth is that it can strike at any age. According to the National Osteoporosis Foundation (NOF), about 10 million Americans are estimated to have the disease, and another 34 million are estimated to have low bone mass, putting them at risk. Small skeletal size, low body weight, low intake of dietary calcium, smoking and a sedentary lifestyle are all risk factors

for osteoporosis.

The good news is that no matter what your age, you can take steps to prevent osteoporosis. Bones are like muscle in that they become stronger with exercise. Two types of exercise that build bone mass and density are weight-bearing (jogging, walking and most sports) and resistance training (lifting weights). These types of exercises are an integral part of any fitness routine.

Well-Rounded Regimen for Older Adults

In addition to endurance (cardio) and strength exercises, balance and mobility should be a focus for older adults. According to a 2007 report from the National Institutes of Health, 9 percent of adults age 65 and older reported having difficulty with balance. Balance training is meant to strengthen muscles, condition the body, and improve stability and alignment. Research has shown that performing balance exercises regularly can lead to decline in fall-

related injuries among this age group, including back, knee and ankle injuries.

Stretching can help maintain mobility and flexibility. The increased range of motion gained through stretching will enable you to be more active as you age. Get in the habit of doing a quick stretch once your muscles are warm from endurance or strength training, and a deeper stretch (holding each position for 15 to 30 seconds) at the end of a workout.

Tips for All Ages

In your youth, some of the most important things you can do for your physical health are:

- Make exercise a priority, and try to incorporate physical activity into your day on a regular basis.
- Explore new physical activities, and find which ones you enjoy the most.
- Don't lose sight of safety. Protect yourself with proper equipment and don't take unnecessary risks.
- Build strong bones through weight bearing exercises and resistance training.

As you age, maintain a robust level of fitness by:

- Consulting with a physician or trainer who can help you decide what kind of activity is best for you.
- Varying your fitness regimen with a good mix of strength, endurance, balance and mobility training.
- Modifying exercises as needed to accommodate any physical limitations.
- Staying active and exercising regularly.

For more information on staying fit as you age, visit the International Council on Active Aging's web site at www.icaa.cc.



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