A Report of the Surgeon General

Physical Activity and Health

Older Adults

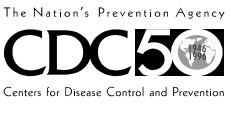
Key Messages

- Older adults, both male and female, can benefit from regular physical activity.
- Physical activity need not be strenuous to achieve health benefits.
- Older adults can obtain significant health benefits with a moderate amount of physical activity, preferably daily. A moderate amount of activity can be obtained in longer sessions of moderately intense activities (such as walking) or in shorter sessions of more vigorous activities (such as fast walking or stairwalking).
- Additional health benefits can be gained through greater amounts of physical activity, either by increasing the duration, intensity, or frequency. Because risk of injury increases at high levels of physical activity, care should be taken not to engage in excessive amounts of activity.
- Previously sedentary older adults who begin physical activity programs should start with short intervals of moderate physical activity (5–10 minutes) and gradually build up to the desired amount.
- Older adults should consult with a physician before beginning a new physical activity program.
- In addition to cardiorespiratory endurance (aerobic) activity, older adults can benefit from muscle-strengthening activities. Stronger muscles help reduce the risk of falling and improve the ability to perform the routine tasks of daily life.

Facts

- The loss of strength and stamina attributed to aging is in part caused by reduced physical activity.
- Inactivity increases with age. By age 75, about one in three men and one in two women engage in no physical activity.
- Among adults aged 65 years and older, walking and gardening or yard work are, by far, the most popular physical activities.
- Social support from family and friends has been consistently and positively related to regular physical activity.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports



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Benefits of Physical Activity

- Helps maintain the ability to live independently and reduces the risk of falling and fracturing bones.
- Reduces the risk of dying from coronary heart disease and of developing high blood pressure, colon cancer, and diabetes.
- Can help reduce blood pressure in some people with hypertension.
- Helps people with chronic, disabling conditions improve their stamina and muscle strength.
- Reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression and fosters improvements in mood and feelings of well-being.
- Helps maintain healthy bones, muscles, and joints.
- Helps control joint swelling and pain associated with arthritis.

What Communities Can Do

- Provide community-based physical activity programs that offer aerobic, strengthening, and flexibility components specifically designed for older adults.
- Encourage malls and other indoor or protected locations to provide safe places for walking in any weather.
- Ensure that facilities for physical activity accommodate and encourage participation by older adults.
- Provide transportation for older adults to parks or facilities that provide physical activity programs.
- Encourage health care providers to talk routinely to their older adult patients about incorporating physical activity into their lives.
- Plan community activities that include opportunities for older adults to be physically active.

For more information contact:

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