

Keeping fit: How to do the right exercise for your age

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Credit: Mikhail Nilov from Pexels

The effect of exercise on health is profound. It can protect you from a range of conditions, including [heart disease](#), [type 2 diabetes](#) and some [cancers](#). But the type and amount of exercise you should do changes as

you age. To ensure that you are doing the right type of exercise for your age, follow this simple guide.

Childhood and adolescence

In childhood, [exercise](#) helps [control body weight](#), [builds healthy bones](#) and promotes [self-confidence](#) and [healthy sleep patterns](#). The government recommends that children should get [at least one hour of exercise a day](#). As a tip:

- Children should try a variety of sports and develop skills, such as swimming and the ability to hit and kick a ball.
- Lots of non-scheduled physical activity is great, too, such as playing in playgrounds.

Exercise habits tend to steadily decline during teen years, [particularly in girls](#). Getting enough exercise promotes a healthy body image and helps manage [stress and anxiety](#). You can also:

Encourage teenagers to keep one team sport, if possible.

For teenagers who are not into team sports, swimming or athletics can be a good way to keep fitness levels up.

In your 20s

You are at your absolute physical peak in your mid-20s, with the fastest reaction times and highest VO2 max – the maximum rate at which the body can pump oxygen to muscles. After this peak, your VO2 max decreases by [up to 1% each year](#) and your [reaction time slows each year](#). The [good news](#) is that regular physical activity can [slow this decline](#). Building lean muscle mass and bone density at this age helps you retain

them in later years.

- Vary your training and keep it fun. Try tag rugby, rowing or boot camp.
- If you are a regular exerciser, get advice from an exercise professional to build "periodisation" into your training regime. This involves dividing your training regime into progressive cycles that manipulate different aspects of training – such as intensity, volume and type of exercise – to optimise your performance and ensure you peak for a planned exercise event, such as a triathlon.

In your 30s

As careers and [family life](#) for many intensify in their 30s, it is important that you maintain cardiovascular fitness and strength to slow normal physical decline. If you have a sedentary job, make sure you maintain good posture and break up long periods of sitting by forcing activity into your day, such as routing your printer to another room, climbing a flight of stairs to use the bathroom on another floor, or standing when taking a phone call so you are moving every half an hour where possible.

- Work smart. Try high-intensity interval training. This is where bursts of high-intensity activity, up to 80% of your maximum heart rate, such as sprinting and cycling, are broken up with periods of lower-intensity exercise. This kind of workout is good for the time poor as it can be done in 20 minutes.
- For all women, and especially after childbirth, do pelvic floor exercises, sometimes known as Kegel exercises daily to help [prevent incontinence](#).
- Diversify your exercise programme to keep it interesting. Try [boot camp](#), spin class or yoga.

In your 40s

Most people start to [put on weight](#) in their 40s. Resistance exercise is the best way to optimise calorie burning to counteract fat accumulation and reverse the loss of three to eight percent of muscle mass per decade. [Ten weeks of resistance training](#) could increase lean weight by 1.4kg, increase resting metabolic rate by 7% and decrease fat weight by 1.8kg.

- Try kettlebells or start a weight-training programme in your gym.
- Take up running, if you don't run already, and don't be afraid to start a more intensive exercise programme. You get more bang for your buck with running versus walking.
- Pilates can be useful to build core strength to protect against back pain, which [often starts in this decade](#).

In your 50s

In this decade, aches and pains may crop up and [chronic conditions](#), such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease, can manifest. As oestrogen declines in postmenopausal women, the risk of [heart disease](#) increases.

- Do strength training twice a week to maintain your muscle mass.
- Weight-bearing exercises, such as walking, is recommended. Walk fast enough so that your breathing rate increases and you break a sweat.
- Try something different. Tai chi can be excellent for [balance](#) and relaxation.

In your 60s

Typically, people accumulate [more chronic conditions](#) as they get older, and ageing is a [major risk factor for cancer](#). Maintaining a high level of

[physical activity](#) can help prevent cancers, such as post-menopausal breast cancer, colon cancer and cancer of the womb, and it reduces the risk of developing chronic conditions, such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

Physical activity tends to decline with age, so keep active and try to buck this trend.

- Try ballroom dancing or other forms of dancing; it's a fun and sociable way to exercise.
- Incorporate strength and flexibility exercises twice a week. Aqua-aerobics can be a great way to develop strength using water as resistance.
- Maintain cardiovascular exercise, such as brisk walking.

70s and beyond

Exercise in your 70s and beyond helps [prevent frailty](#) and [falls](#), and it's important for your [cognitive function](#). If you have a period of ill health, try to keep mobile, if possible. [Strength and fitness can decline rapidly](#) if you are bed bound or very inactive, which can make it hard to get back to previous levels.

- Walk and talk. Instead of inactive visits from family and friends, go for a walk together. It will [keep you motivated and boost your health](#) more than solitary exercise.
- Incorporate some strength, balance and cardiovascular exercise in your regime. But get advice from a physiotherapist or other exercise professional, especially if you have several [chronic conditions](#).

The main message is to keep moving throughout your life. Sustained exercise is what benefits health most.

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