

Don't Let social isolation keep you from being active

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By now, we're all aware that COVID-19 is especially dangerous for older adults—the older you are, the higher your risk for serious illness and even death if you contract the virus. Because there is no treatment or a vaccine yet, it's vitally important that we practice social distancing and wear masks to protect ourselves from disease.

But as we work to keep ourselves safe, we also need to be sure we're not falling into physical inactivity. When we cut ourselves off from shopping, walking in malls, and going to the gym and other places where we can exercise, we can become sedentary. Older adults who don't get [regular exercise](#) may become prone to [chronic diseases](#), weakened muscles, and frailty.

Researchers from the University of Sao Paulo in Brazil recently reported on the dangers of physical inactivity for older adults during COVID-19. Their paper was published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

The researchers noted that it only takes five to 10 days of [physical inactivity](#) for your muscles to begin shrinking and wasting away. This can speed the progression of sarcopenia ([muscle](#) loss) and can lead to chronic diseases.

Studies also show that older adults who walk fewer than 1,500 steps a day can lose 4 percent of the [muscle tissue](#) in their legs in just two weeks.

Although it's too soon to know how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact [physical activity](#), researchers say that wearable trackers (such as Fitbit) provide early estimates. Information from 30 million users worldwide estimate a 12 percent step-count decline in the United States (comparing the week of March 22, between 2019 and 2020), and an even greater decline in other countries.

Having an adequate amount of muscle mass enables you to be strong; being weak or frail is a known risk factor for death in older adults. Two weeks of inactivity (a 75 percent daily step reduction) has been shown to decrease muscle strength by 8 percent—and studies show that two weeks of rehabilitation exercises did not help people rebuild their muscle strength. What's more, in addition to its impact on muscle mass and function, reducing steps to between 1,000 to 1,500 steps per day has been shown to raise blood sugar and increase inflammation.

The researchers suggested that strategies to reduce the potential unhealthy effects of isolation are important. Resistance exercise is a classic and proven method to increase muscle mass, strength, and mobility, even for people in their 90s. Exercise programs you can do at home are especially important during isolation, and are a good way to maintain or even improve your muscle health and mobility. Exercise also helps prevent falls, a common cause of disability and hospitalization for older adults.

The researchers suggested that health education for [older adults](#) should include recommendations to introduce light activity into daily routines, focusing on sitting less and moving more, which is particularly important for people with mobility issues.

Good ways to work in more movement include:

- Interrupting prolonged sitting time by taking strolling or standing

breaks (such as moving around during commercials while watching TV).

- Performing light household chores like cleaning and gardening and enjoying leisure activities such as dancing or short-distance walking.
- Joining family members in-person (when safe) or remotely by FaceTime or Zoom to stay active and gain emotional support.

More information: Hamilton Roschel et al, Risk of Increased Physical Inactivity During COVID -19 Outbreak in Older People: A Call for Actions, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/jgs.16550](https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.16550)

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