

Overcoming midlife barriers to exercise and better health

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It can literally be as easy as a walk in the park.

Just 30 minutes of movement—anything that gets your heart beating faster—five times a week is all it takes to meet federal guidelines for physical activity. In fact, the goal is 150 minutes a week, whether it's split up daily or not.

And there's plenty of reason to do it: Study after study finds physical activity—especially in midlife—is critical to preserving good heart and [brain health](#) as people age. Yet despite the wealth of research that shows staying active is one of the most effective, and affordable, means of warding off [chronic illnesses](#) such as [heart disease](#), diabetes and dementia, statistics show relatively few people in midlife move as much as health experts say they should.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly one-third of U.S. adults over the age of 50 get no physical activity outside of work.

"Midlife is a busy [time](#)," said Margie Lachman, a professor of psychology at Brandeis University and director of the Boston Roybal Center for Active Lifestyle Interventions. Her team studies the barriers to physical activity as well as ways to keep people moving in midlife and beyond.

"What we have found is the biggest barrier is not having enough time," she said. "Typically, people in midlife have multiple roles and they are multi-tasking like crazy, working, raising children and sometimes also caregiving (for) older parents, not to mention other responsibilities they might have in the community."

And all those responsibilities contribute to another barrier to exercise—fatigue.

If they do have any free time or energy, exercise might not make the

priority list, Lachman said. "They may also feel guilty doing something perceived as taking time for themselves, versus working late or spending more time with family."

These obstacles—while daunting—don't have to be insurmountable, Lachman said.

She recommends setting goals and following up with a plan for where and when to exercise. Her research published in the journal *Psychology & Health* found middle-aged adults who believed they didn't have enough time to exercise increased physical activity, as well as their confidence in achieving exercise goals, if they used planning tools.

"Just like we have reminders for meetings and things we need to do for work, we need to put physical activity in our calendar and block off time. If not every day, then maybe start with two or three times a week," said Vanessa Xanthakis, assistant professor of medicine and biostatistics at Boston University School of Medicine.

"If you put physical activity on your calendar ahead of time, you're not going to schedule meetings at that time," she said. "You will go out and walk, go to the gym, go swimming, go cycling. That's what blocked time means."

Competition for the most steps and the social support of exercising with friends and family also can help keep adults motivated, shows another study from Lachman in the journal *Research on Aging*.

"One thing that I think is useful in midlife is to try to integrate [physical activity](#) with other things you want to do as well," Lachman said.

Incorporate movement throughout the day to make every moment count, she said. "Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Walk your child to

school, if that's an option. Take a walk with a co-worker instead of sitting down for a meeting. Every little bit you do adds up."

"Goal setting does not have to be overly ambitious," Xanthakis said, "and should be tailored to individual fitness levels. Those who are not active at all can start slowly, while those who are already moderately active can increase the intensity or frequency of their activity."

"Just start moving your body. There are easy things you can do. Park your car as far away as possible from the grocery store to get the extra steps. Try walking to an errand if it's close by, rather than driving."

If nothing else, Lachman said, just walk.

"Walking regularly has huge benefits. You don't necessarily need equipment or to join a gym. For the most part, it's something people can do without having to make an investment."

The rewards will follow.

On days people exercise, they feel better, said Lachman, who co-authored a study in *Sleep Health* showing women in midlife who exercised more also slept better.

Once you establish a habit, it gets easier, she said. "You feel better, physically and mentally, psychologically, and that's a self-reinforcing experience because you want to do it again it feels good. When you don't exercise, you miss it. It takes a while to establish this."

And it's a [heart](#) and brain health risk factor over which people have total control, Xanthakis said. She recently led a study published in the *Journal of the American Heart Association* showing regular exercise and eating a healthy diet during midlife helped achieve good cardiometabolic health

later in life.

"This is something we can tackle," she said. "It's not easy to lower [blood pressure](#) or cholesterol from one day to the next, but something we can definitely control is we can exercise more in quantity and quality."

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