

# Not a gym rat? Here's how to get started on an outdoor exercise routine

May 29 2024, by Albert Stumm

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April Herring poses with her bike along the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal on July 2, 2021. Credit: Kellie A. Tikkun via AP

Between the sweat smell, fluorescent lights and omnipresent television screens, April Herring has never connected with going to the gym.

Instead, she runs, bikes, hikes, plays tennis, pickleball and football—anything to get her exercise outside as often as possible.

"Fresh air, sunshine, the variety of the trees as the seasons change," said Herring, an administrator at Carroll Community College in North Maryland. "There's something about the energetic healing quality of nature."

The health benefits of spending time in nature have long been established, and exercise in general, of course, improves physical and mental well-being.

Combine the two and you double down on what adults need to stay healthy, said Debbie Rhea, professor in kinesiology at Texas Christian University.

"We've got to get outside. We've got to be active," Rhea said. "If we're going to live long lives, this is what it's about."

Getting started on an outdoor routine, however, might not be as easy as signing up for another gym membership. Here's how to get going.

## **START SIMPLE WITH WHAT YOU LIKE**

If you haven't been active for a while, think back to the activities you enjoyed years ago, suggested Connie Sciolino, founder of the Alpine Training Center in Boulder, Colorado, a gym that trains athletes for outdoor mountain sports.

People who like occasionally hiking or biking should start building an

aerobic base by taking progressively longer walks or rides. Once you're comfortably in the 35- to 45-minute range, start adding some intensity to build strength, she said.



April Herring poses with her bike on the Great Allegheny Passage trail on June 29, 2021 in western Pennsylvania. Credit: Kellie A. Tikkun via AP

"If jogging is their main activity, I would send them to bleachers or do some up-down on stairs, either in sprint format or put a pack on their back," she said.

Rhea cautioned against jumping back into a sport you used to play without preparing your body for the proper movement.

"Let's say they're in their 30s, 40s, 50s, and they haven't sprinted and now they try to run around those bases," she said. "They're probably going to hurt an Achilles or a hamstring or something by doing something too fast."

## **THEN BUILD STRENGTH WITH WHAT'S AROUND**

A side benefit of exercising outside is that there's no need to buy expensive equipment, trainers say.

After warming up with your preferred aerobic activity, add strength training by using your body weight and what is available in the built environment. That could be finding a picnic table or low wall and placing your hands shoulder-width apart to do leaning pushups. Then turn around, put your hands on the same surface and lower your body for dips that work your triceps.

For working your legs, add squats with your feet shoulder-width apart, looking straight ahead with your back straight. Add lunges by taking giant steps and bending down into the space between your feet. For the core, find a patch of grass to do sit-ups.

Start with eight to 10 repetitions, or no more than you are comfortable with, and add sets with short breaks in between as you get stronger.

For a more complete workout, find a park or trail with [outdoor exercise](#) equipment, which is installed in [one-third of park agencies](#), according to the National Recreation and Park Association. The equipment can range from basic pull-up bars to gym-style bench presses and rowing machines.

And many cities, including [Chicago](#), [San Antonio](#) and [Atlanta](#), offer free

group classes outdoors.



Racers competing outside for the title of "King and Queen" of The Alpine Training Center Gym in Boulder, Colo., on July 26, 2023. Credit: Scott Griesser via AP

## **HOW TO STAY MOTIVATED—EVEN IN BAD WEATHER**

When it inevitably rains or the weather turns colder, it helps to keep in mind an old axiom: There's no such thing as [bad weather](#), only bad clothing.

"If we have the clothing for whatever the temperatures are that we may

be in, then we're more likely to go outside to be active when we need to," Rhea said.

She suggested investing in a jacket that breathes and a light hat with a brim you can use on sunny or [rainy days](#).

Trainer Katie Higginbotham recommended having a contingency plan for inclement weather. Pick an area with surfaces that won't get slippery when wet or somewhere with some tree shelter so as not to be bombarded by rain.

On those days, having a regular exercise buddy really helps, said Higginbotham, who oversees quality control for TrainFitness, a U.K.-based private training provider.

"If you know someone is there waiting for you, it's difficult to say no at the last minute," she said.

Finally, it helps to set a goal, whether that is training for a 5K charity walk or a triathlon. If you're working toward something, it keeps you motivated to keep going, Sciolino said.

"When you have that day marked on your calendar, you have to perform these things or die out there," she said.

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Citation: Not a gym rat? Here's how to get started on an outdoor exercise routine (2024, May 29) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-05-gym-rat-outdoor-routine.html>

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