

Want the health benefits of strength training but not keen on the gym? Try 'exercise snacking'

July 17 2024, by Justin Keogh and Jackson Fyfe



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The science is clear: [resistance training](#) is crucial to aging well. Lifting weights (or doing bodyweight exercises like lunges, squats or push-ups)

can help you live independently for longer, make your bones stronger, reduce your risk of diseases such as diabetes, and may even improve your [sleep and mental health](#).

But not everyone loves the gym. Perhaps you feel you're not a "gym person" and never will be, or you're too old to start. Being a gym-goer can be expensive and time-consuming, and some people report feeling [unwelcome](#) or [awkward](#) at the gym.

The good news is you don't need the gym, or lots of free time, to get the health benefits [resistance training](#) can offer.

You can try "exercise snacking" instead.

What is exercise snacking?

Exercise snacking involves doing multiple shorter bouts (as little as 20 seconds) of exercise throughout the day—often with minimal or no equipment. It's OK to have [several hours of rest](#) between.

You could do simple bodyweight exercises such as:

- chair sit-to-stand (squats)
- lunges
- box step-ups
- calf raises
- push-ups.

Exercise snacking like this can help improve [muscle mass](#), strength and physical function.

It's OK to hold onto a nearby object for balance, if you need. And doing these exercises regularly will also improve your balance. That, in turn,

reduces your risk of falls and fractures.

OK I have done all those, now what?

Great! You can also try using resistance bands or dumbbells to do the previously mentioned five exercises as well as some of the following exercises:

- [seated rows](#)
- [chest](#) and [shoulder presses](#)
- [bicep curls](#)
- [knee extensions](#)
- [leg curls](#).

When using resistance bands, make sure you hold them tightly and that they're securely attached to an immovable object.

Exercise snacking works well when you pair it with an activity you do often throughout the day. Perhaps you could:

- do a few extra squats every time you get up from a bed or chair
- do some lunges during a TV ad break
- chuck in a few half squats while you're waiting for your kettle to boil
- do a couple of elevated push-ups (where you support your body with your hands on a chair or a bench while doing the push-up) before tucking into lunch
- sneak in a couple of calf raises while you're brushing your teeth.

What does the evidence say about exercise snacking?

One [study](#) had older adults without a history of resistance training do exercise [snacks](#) at home twice per day for four weeks.

Each session involved five simple bodyweight exercises (chair sit-to-stand, seated knee extension, standing knee bends, marching on the spot, and standing calf raises). The participants did each exercise continuously for one minute, with a one-minute break between exercises.

These short and simple exercise sessions, which lasted just nine minutes, were enough to improve a person's ability to stand up from a chair by 31% after four weeks (compared to a control group who didn't exercise). Leg power and thigh muscle size improved, too.

Research involving one of us (Jackson Fyfe) has also [shown older adults](#) found "exercise snacking" feasible and enjoyable when done at home either once, twice, or three times per day for four weeks.

Exercise snacking may be a more sustainable approach to improve muscle health in those who don't want to—or can't—lift heavier weights in a gym.

A little can yield a lot

We know from other research that the more you exercise, the more likely it is you will [keep exercising in future](#).

Very brief resistance training, albeit with heavier weights, may be more [enjoyable](#) than traditional approaches where people aim to do many, many sets.

We also know brief-and-frequent exercise sessions can break up [periods](#) of sedentary behavior (which usually means sitting too much). Too much sitting increases your risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, whereas exercise snacking can help keep your [blood sugar levels steady](#).

Of course, longer-term studies are needed. But the evidence we do have suggests exercise snacking really helps.

Why does any of this matter?

As you age, you lose strength and mass in the muscles you use to walk, or stand up. Everyday tasks can become a struggle.

All this [contributes](#) to disability, hospitalization, chronic disease, and reliance on community and residential aged care support.

By preserving your muscle mass and strength, you can:

- reduce joint pain
- get on with activities you enjoy
- live independently in your own home
- delay or even eliminate the need for expensive health care or residential aged care.

What if I walk a lot—is that enough?

Walking may maintain some level of lower body muscle mass, but it won't preserve your [upper body muscles](#).

If you find it difficult to get out of a chair, or can only walk [short distances](#) without getting out of breath, resistance training is the best way to regain some of the independence and function you've lost.

It's even more important for women, as muscle mass and strength are typically lower in [older women](#) than men. And if you've been diagnosed with osteoporosis, which is more common in older women than men, resistance exercise snacking at home can improve your balance, strength, and bone mineral density. All of this reduces the risk of falls and fractures.

You don't need [heavy weights](#) or fancy equipment to benefit from resistance training.

So will you start exercise snacking today?

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