

Getting back in shape in 2018? Great, but do it safely

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(HealthDay)—Getting into shape or losing a few pounds is a worthy New Year's resolution, but one that comes with a warning: Take it slow.

Jumping whole-hog into an exercise regime is a good way to get yourself hurt if you haven't worked out for a while, experts say.

"People get into trouble when they want to do too much too soon," said Dr. Gerardo Miranda-Comas, an assistant professor of rehabilitation at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City. "You need to increase your level of activity gradually."

"Consider it more like a marathon than a sprint," he said.

Keep in mind that you've likely lost a good amount of fitness if you haven't worked out in a while, warns the American Council on Exercise (ACE).

People who stop regular resistance training tend to

lose their strength at about half the rate it was gained, and cardio fitness declines even faster than that, according to council.

So before you start, understand that you won't be able to perform at previous levels. Also consider that you might have developed a medical condition that could affect your exercise.

The council recommends that you answer a few questions:

- Do you have a heart condition or feel pain in your chest when you perform physical activity?
- Do you ever become dizzy, lose your balance or pass out?
- Do you have bone or joint pain that could become worse from exercise?

Answering "yes" to any of those questions should prompt you to talk with your doctor or a sports medicine specialist before you hit the gym, Miranda-Comas said.

"We can evaluate and assess for any possible medical issue that might come up, and help create an exercise program that's right for you," he said.

Once you start, ease yourself back into your [exercise program](#), suggested Neal Pire, executive director of the American College of Sports Medicine's Greater New York Regional Chapter.

"Keep in mind that, regardless of how low and slow you go when you start a new exercise plan, some is better than none," Pire said. "Starting slowly—even if only with a 20-minute moderately paced walk—is key. Gradually and steadily increasing the amount, intensity and duration of your exercise is how you get fit over time."

ACE recommends that people start with 20 or 30 minutes of low-intensity aerobic activity two or three

times a week. Once you're comfortable, gradually increase the duration, intensity or frequency of your workouts.

Same goes for weight training. Pick a weight you can lift at least 12 times in a row but not more than 15—and keep in mind it might be 50 to 90 percent less than what you could lift four months ago, according to council.

Also, be sure to warm up before working out to further reduce your chances of injury, said Dr. Russell Camhi, a primary care and [sports medicine](#) physician at Northwell Health in Great Neck, N.Y.

"People just walk right into the gym, jump onto the first machine they see and start doing three sets of 10," Camhi said. "It's proper to do a proper warm-up to get the body loose and warm and get the heart rate up."

Walking on a treadmill for 5 to 10 minutes will warm you up, but if you want to get into your workout more quickly, try a "dynamic warm-up," Camhi said. A few lunges, squats or other body-weight exercises can prepare you for more strenuous activity.

People also should weave stretching into their workout routine, along with aerobics and strength training, Camhi added. This could be stretching for 10 minutes before and after working out or taking part in a yoga class.

"Muscles have a range of motion they have to move through, and we underestimate the importance of flexibility to our body's ability to move," Camhi said.

Once you've started working out, don't be surprised or discouraged if you have a few sore muscles, the experts say.

People are sometimes surprised to find that sore muscles arise a couple days after their workout, but it's a common phenomenon called delayed onset [muscle soreness](#), he said.

"If you work out on Monday, expect to be sore the day after the day after," Camhi said.

However, if your muscle soreness lingers past a few days, it's a sign you're probably overdoing it, Camhi and Miranda-Comas said. Reduce the amount of aerobic exercise you're performing or drop some pounds off your weights.

Keep an eye out for fatigue, chest pain or dizziness as you're working out—these could be signs that you're working too hard, Miranda-Comas said. Trouble sleeping or being in a perpetual bad mood could be signs of overtraining as well. Consider taking a step back or consulting your doctor.

To maintain a long-term exercise plan, set a realistic goal for yourself and a realistic plan for getting there, said Sharon Zarabi, director of the bariatric program at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City.

"Start off with an attainable yet realistic goal of doing some sort of purposeful activity three times a week," Zarabi said. "Be specific with what days of the week and arrange times within the day so you are more inclined to actually stick with it." She suggests not committing to something like an hour a day, five days a week at first, "because the likelihood of that continuing through the long term will probably fade."

And don't expect miracle results. The pounds should not drop off or your fitness improve within a couple weeks. If that happens, it's a sign that you've undertaken an [exercise](#) regime or diet that will not be sustainable in the long run.

"Appropriate weight loss is one or two pounds per week," Camhi said. "You should have realistic expectations. It does not happen overnight—and the slower things change, the more likely it is that they will stay that way. If you lose 15 pounds in the first two weeks, it's very unlikely that's going to stay off."

More information: The American Council on Exercise has more on [restarting an exercise program](#).

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