

## **29 Ideas from Experts**

### **Physical Fitness Tips for Seniors**

One of the reasons Americans are living longer is they are in better physical condition than were their parents, primarily because today's senior citizens are more aware of the need for exercise. To help encourage seniors to improve physical fitness, and do it safely, a group of experts gathered by the [International Council on Active Aging](#) (ICAA) has prepared 29 helpful suggestions.

"Too often," says the ICAA, "people jump into exercise or try to do what they did 20 years ago, injuring themselves in the process. The 50-plus adult's physical capabilities and chronic diseases make this individual's needs different than those of a younger person."

#### **1. Get a checkup**

Meet with your healthcare provider to see whether you'll need to consider any special modifications before starting an exercise program. If necessary, get a clearance to begin a program.

#### **2. Know your options**

Before starting any program, examine your options. Pick a program you know you will enjoy. Some individuals like to go to a gym and do a structured workout, while others enjoy a neighborhood walking club. Either will help improve your fitness, ability to function and quality of life-but only if you do it regularly.

#### **3. Determine your participation style**

Would you prefer taking a class or going solo? Are you a morning or night person? Does indoor fitness appeal to you, or would you prefer to play outside? Could you dedicate large blocks of time to physical activity or could you fit only shorter, more frequent intervals into your schedule? Be realistic about how you participate.

#### **4. Start slowly**

Many people are eager to get started and sometimes overdo it, which usually makes them sore and can make them want to stop. A good way to start slowly is to discover your baseline. Record all your activities during each waking hour or for two- or three-hour time blocks, tracking how much time you are sedentary (e.g. sitting at your desk) or active (e.g. walking to the bus stop). At day's end, count how many hours you have and have not been physically active. Then look at when you could fit some short (e.g. 10 minutes) bouts of brisk walking into your day.

#### **5. Make a date**

Find a buddy to exercise with you and keep you motivated. Whether it's a friend to walk with in your neighborhood or a personal trainer in a gym, that appointment makes it more likely you'll do the walk or workout.

#### **6. Set specific short and long-term goals**

Make goals as specific as possible. For example, On Monday, Wednesday and Friday, I will do a brisk, 10-minute walk in the morning before my shower, at lunch time and after dinner. Being specific means you are planning for activity in your day and making it a priority. Long-term goals are also important. Is there an activity you would like to do that you feel physically incapable of at the moment, but may be able to do with a little effort? Set a long-term goal to help you do it.

#### **7. Make a list**

List the benefits you expect from your physical activity program, then make sure these are realistic and reasonable. Many people expect enormous benefits, such as losing 30 pounds in a month. When these benefits don't materialize, they feel disappointed and relapse because they feel like they've failed. Try to make the benefits about things you can control, rather than an outcome (such as weight). Build your list of benefits as you increase your physical activity-you'll be surprised at how long your list becomes.

## **8. Make another list**

List all the reasons to be physically active-things like decreasing stress or depression, stronger bones, greater strength and flexibility to help maintain independence, increased energy, better sleep, etc. Keep this list in a visible place as a daily reminder of the long-term rewards.

## **9. Invest in your health**

Do you want to spend money on joining a program? Or would you prefer to develop a program you can do for little cost, using objects or props in your home or office? Both options are available.

## **10. Checkout the facility you want to join**

Does the facility feel friendly? Can you change clothes comfortably? If the facility has a pool, what is its water temperature? About 84-86°F is comfortable for moderate to vigorous activity, while warmer temperatures are nice for range-of-motion and relaxation programs. Does the pool or workout room have an easy and safe exit/entry? Ask to try various programs, so you can decide which program feels the most comfortable and fun.

## **11. Checkout the staff**

Are the people who work in the facility friendly and interested in you? Are they qualified to work with older adults? Do the staff members each have a college degree in health? Do they offer pre-exercise fitness assessments, with periodic updates? Are they interested in helping you learn how to modify exercises to fit your fitness level and conditions? Do they encourage social interaction? Talk to mature adults who currently participate in their programs to build a complete picture.

## **12. Make choices**

To move forward, we need to leave some things behind. What are you willing to give up to make room for exercise? Bad habits? Nonproductive activities? Nonbeneficial relationships?

## **13. Every step counts**

Wear a step counter throughout the day to count how many steps you take. Less active people tend to take about 4,000 steps or fewer per day. Aim to do 250 to 1,000 additional steps of brisk walking, until you reach 8,000 to 10,000 steps in a day.

## **14. Keep moving all the time**

Stretch, walk, march in place, stand and sit as many times as possible when you're talking on the phone or during TV commercials.

## **15. Do your own house and yard work**

## **16. Create a support network**

Tell friends and family about your new goals and ask for their support and encouragement. Involving others often helps us to keep our commitments. Consider scheduling telephone reminders from your support network to help keep you on track.

## **17. Know your challenges**

List things that keep you from being active and come up with a solution for each. Recognize that challenges can be overcome.

## **18. Use the principles of progressive overload and specificity**

Exercise in a way that makes your muscles work harder than they are accustomed to, but in a gradual and progressive manner. And understand that you get what you train for, so exercise according to your desired outcomes.

## **19. Join a class**

Select an exercise class appropriate for your health status and ability. Check with your local YMCA, JCC, hospital-based fitness program, city recreation program or health club to view the course offerings. Visit the local arthritis foundation for a list of all aquatic and land-based classes designed for those with arthritis conditions.

## **20. Wear the right shoes**

Foot comfort and support is important for all impact physical activities. If you have arthritis, diabetes or orthopedic problems, you can remain physically active with the help of appropriate shoes.

## **21. Participate in events**

Once you're more physically fit, set a goal to participate in a charity event. Prepare to walk, run or bike to raise money for a special cause. Ask a friend to be your exercise and event partner.

## **22. If it hurts, don't do it**

Work around pain, not through it.

## **23. Focus on the major muscle groups in the legs, chest and back**

## **24. Do balance exercises, as well as strength exercises**

## **25. Keep a journal**

Record activities that have become easier to do in your life, as well as those that may be more difficult. Instructors can help you progress and modify exercises, if needed.

## **26. Make your car work for you**

Park at the outer edges of the grocery store parking lot, rather than looking for the space closest to the door. Walk up the first flight of stairs in a high-rise, rather than waiting for the elevator. Add another floor every week. Walk to the grocery store or other services when possible.

## **27. Reach up**

Take items from the highest shelf you can reach in the kitchen and wash them. Do a different cupboard each week.

## **28. Follow a well-rounded program**

Include all five components of a successful program: warm-up, flexibility, cardio, resistance and cool-down.

## **29. Reward yourself**

Once you've reached your goal, treat yourself to something that reminds you what a good job you've done and encourages you to continue. Make it something that feeds your spirit, but is not necessarily food or an expensive purchase.

These tips were created by the following members of the ICAA advisory board:

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## **About the International Council on Active Aging (ICAA)**

The ICAA is the only organization in North America dedicated to changing the way we age by uniting and working with professionals in the retirement, assisted living, fitness, rehabilitation and wellness fields. It connects a community of like-minded professionals who share the goals of changing society's perceptions of aging and improving the quality of life for aging baby boomers and older adults within the six dimensions of wellness (emotional, vocational, physical, spiritual, intellectual, social.) The council supports these professionals with education, information, resources and tools, so they can achieve optimal success with this growing market.