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women's health

Healthy for Life: Fitness Needs for Every Decade of a Woman's Life

Get moving: Fitness for women at any stage of life

By [Carol Sorgen](#)
WebMD Feature

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Melanie McGill is the first to admit that she has never been athletic. But she was always active. There were kids to chase around, a dog to walk --- in short, the busy life that keeps most women on the go. But since the kids have grown up, McGill finds that, at 53, the lifestyle that once kept her reasonably in shape has been replaced. Now she spends hours behind a desk, focusing on her career as a special education professor.

It was when McGill started to plan a ski trip that she finally faced the fact that age and inactivity had caught up with her. "I had no strength," she says. "I was out of breath going up the stairs. I had a pain in my lower back. And, I lost my abs. I don't know where they went, but they were gone." It was a rude awakening. But McGill admitted she needed to spend a little less time at her desk and a little more time focusing on fitness.

Getting started: Make a conscious choice to be fit

As a volunteer with the American Heart Association (AHA) in Dallas, McGill learned of "Choose to Move." That's the AHA's new 12-week physical activity program designed to help women live a healthier lifestyle without spending a lot of time or money.

"I realized I had to stop talking about getting fit and healthy and do something about it," says McGill, who was chosen by the AHA along with six other women to kick off the program and chronicle their success online.

After a physical assessment that identified her strengths (her weight is fine, thank you very much) and weaknesses (she needs to focus on cardiovascular fitness and strong bones), McGill now spends 30 minutes almost every day in vigorous physical activity. "I'm getting past leisurely walking and gradually increasing my pace," she says. In addition, she is working out with free weights for strength and doing floor exercises for core stability. "I'm hoping that these exercises will prevent injuries and keep my lower back from aching," says McGill.

McGill has made other small changes in her daily routine. Instead of lying in bed a few extra minutes, she is up at 6:30 a.m. so she can walk for 30 minutes before heading to work. She takes the steps more than the elevator, and she walks to the store instead of driving. "I keep a comfortable pair of shoes in my car and in my office so I can walk more often," she says.

"Being part of the program helps," says McGill. "I have the support of the others and I don't want to let anyone down."

More than just getting fit

continued...

McGill has found an unexpected benefit in her increased activity level. "It's a wonderful stress reliever," she says. "When I'm working really hard, exercising becomes an emotional release. I think it's going to become addictive."

That is not the only benefit she has discovered. "What I'm learning," McGill says, "is that it's important to do something for myself. I've always been available for my husband, my children, and my job. But I'm finally discovering that I can give myself the gift of being healthy and active."

As McGill learned, your health and fitness needs change as you move through the decades. More importantly, no matter what your age is, says Jennifer H. Mieres, MD, FACC, FAHA, exercising and staying fit should be a part of your daily routine. Mieres is director of nuclear cardiology and an assistant professor at New York University School of Medicine. She is also a medical spokeswoman for "Choose to Move."

"Staying fit reduces the risk factors of [heart disease](#)," Mieres explains. By exercising regularly, you can also control [cholesterol](#), weight, blood pressure, and stress.

According to the National [Women's Health](#) Information Center, exercise also:

- lowers your risk of getting [colon cancer](#) and diabetes
- keeps your bones, muscles, and joints healthy
- reduces anxiety and depression and improves your mood
- protects against falling and bone fractures in older adults

- protects against breast cancer
- aids in controlling joint swelling and pain from arthritis
- increases energy
- helps you sleep better
- helps you look better

A lifetime of fitness

By developing good exercise habits when you are young, Mieres explains, fitness becomes a lifetime habit, but it is never too late to start. And remember, always get your doctor's okay before starting any exercise program, but particularly if you have any chronic health concerns.

Most fitness experts recommend at least 30 minutes of exercise a day most days of the week to get the health benefits you need. Your exercise should include a mix of cardiovascular exercise (such as jogging, cycling, or racquetball) strength training (using, for example, free weights or resistance bands), and flexibility activities (such as stretching, yoga, and tai chi).

But if all this sounds like too much --- and it may be if you have not exercised in the past --- then moving even for short periods can be helpful. In fact, studies show that those who exercise for ten minutes three times a day achieve the same cardiovascular fitness effects as those whose workouts continue for 30 minutes.

Whichever decade you are in, you can tailor an exercise program to meet your age, fitness level, and individual health issues, says personal trainer Larysa DiDio, owner of Physical Fitness Xperts in Pleasantville, New York.

Follow this guide for a lifetime of fitness:

A lifetime of fitness continued...

Fitness for women: The 20s

Your 20s are the decade when you are laying the foundation for your future, DiDio tells WebMD. "Unless you have a specific medical condition or challenge," she says, "you can pretty much do whatever you want." DiDio advises women in their 20s to work out up to 6 days a week, 3 days with cardiovascular training (such as jogging, vigorous walking, cycling) and 3 days of weight training.

And, she says, there is no need to go to the gym if you don't want to or can't afford it. Free weights between 5 and 20 pounds, depending on your fitness level, will allow you to work at home, according to DiDio. "At this age you're building for the future in terms of your bone density, muscle strength, and cardiovascular health," says DiDio. "So the more exercise, the better."

Fitness for women: The 30s

When you hit your 30s, you may find increasing job and family responsibilities have cut into your available work out time. Pregnancy and childbirth may also have left you with weaker abs and that pesky "baby weight." By focusing on time-efficient core exercises - such as Pilates - you can build abdominal strength. And strong abs mean a stronger back as well.

Don't forget the cardiovascular workouts either, says DiDio. Running, she says, is a good way to get the most benefit in the least amount of time. DiDio also recommends working out in the morning. Not only will you rev up your metabolism for the entire day, but you also will be less likely to find an excuse not to exercise --- as you might if you wait until later in the day. Additionally, exercising in the morning will help you make better food choices throughout the day since you will be motivated not to derail your good efforts.

Fitness for women: The 40s

The 40s are the decade when your metabolism starts to slow down and muscle mass begins to decrease significantly. So weight training becomes increasingly important. DiDio recommends three strength-training sessions a week.

According to the American Council on Exercise, there are three primary benefits to a regular resistance-training program.

- 1) **Increased strength of bones, muscles, and connective tissue.** Exercise not only decreases the risk of eventually developing osteoporosis, it decreases your risk of injury in everything you do.
- 2) **Increased muscle mass.** The more muscle you have, the more calories your body burns at rest. That can make it easier to control your weight.
3. **Enhanced quality of life.** This becomes increasingly important as we get older. What this means is that the things we do every day --- like carrying groceries in from the car --- will become easier as our overall strength improves.

Fitness for women: The 40s continued...

In your 40s, you are also more prone to injuries. So consider giving up high-impact activities - like jogging or aerobics. DiDio advises switching to low-impact programs such as Pilates or using a treadmill or stationary bike.

Fitness for women: The 50s

Menopause and post-menopausal symptoms usually surface in the 50s and often include weight changes, insomnia, high blood pressure, hot flashes, and stress. Research has shown that exercise, such as walking and yoga, can reduce the symptoms of menopause.

Because your flexibility drops in your 50s, DiDio says, stretching is increasingly important. Cardiovascular fitness is still necessary, but consider fitness activities with more "fun" potential, for instance dance classes, to keep from getting bored. And minimize your risk of injury by cross training.

"As you get older, you're more likely to injure a joint or muscle if you use it repetitively," says DiDio. Continue with cardiovascular exercise 20 or more minutes per session, three days a week, at a pace that lets you carry on a conversation. Lift hand weights for improved strength and posture. The right size weight is one that is comfortable for eight repetitions. Then build up to 12 repetitions. And remember to include flexibility and stretching exercises such as yoga.

Fitness for women: The 60s

Researchers have found that if you exercise in your 60s - even as little as once a week - you will live longer than those who don't exercise at all. So keep up with your cardiovascular activities, but make sure you emphasize strength training and core exercises to increase your stability.

As you get older, you want to avoid falls and the risk of bone fractures, which can become more prevalent. Yoga and tai chi, DiDio says, are good choices for improving both your flexibility and your balance.

Fitness for women: The 70s and beyond

Keep moving! Exercise for 30 minutes a day, 5 days a week, and continue to include cardiovascular, strength training, and flexibility exercises in your routine, says DiDio. Walking, swimming, light weights, tai chi, and yoga can all be good choices for women in their 70s as long as you have your doctor's permission. Be especially careful, however, of your balance. You want to avoid the risk of a fall.

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women's health newsletter

Growing older doesn't have to mean getting old. Sign up today to get WebMD's popular Women's Health newsletter for advice on growing older gracefully.

SOURCES: Melanie McGill, participant, American Heart Association's Choose to Move program. Jennifer H. Mieres, MD, FACC, FAHA, director of nuclear cardiology, assistant professor at New York University School of Medicine, and medical spokeswoman for Choose to Move. Larisa DiDio, owner, Physical Fitness Xperts, Pleasantville, NY. National Women's Health Information Center: "Physical Activity." WebMD Feature: "Your Exercise Routine: How Much is Enough?" American Council on Exercise: "ACE Fit Fact: Strength Training 101." WebMD Medical News: "Exercise May Ease Menopause Symptoms." WebMD Feature: "Women Over 50: Fitness Tips." WebMD Medical News: "Elderly Who Exercise Some Live Longer."

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