

Exercise: A Powerful Prescription

A practical introduction to aerobic, resistance, and balance exercise for older adults.

About this edition: This accessible copy presents the source material in a single-column reading order with structured headings, lists, and descriptive links. The original PDF remains available separately.

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Build a balanced routine

A well-rounded routine includes three types of activity: aerobic exercise, resistance exercise, and balance and stability training. Start at a level that feels comfortable and progress gradually.

Aerobic exercise

Aerobic exercise improves heart health, endurance, energy levels, and stress management. It also increases blood flow throughout the body and brain, helping support memory, thinking, and overall brain health. Depending on your comfort and present fitness level, you may choose moderate-intensity activity, vigorous-intensity activity, or a combination of both.

Build up gradually

- 1. Start.** Begin with 10–15 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise, 2 days per week. If a full session feels difficult, use several short 3–5 minute “exercise snacks” throughout the day that add up to your goal.

- 2. Progress.** Gradually increase to 30 minutes of continuous aerobic exercise over several weeks.

- 3. Advance.** When able, add 10–15 minutes of vigorous-intensity intervals within a 30-minute session. If needed, spread exercise across 3–4 days per week.

- 4. Goal.** Build to 30–35 minutes of exercise, 5 days per week, maintaining a mix of moderate and vigorous activity as tolerated.

Use the talk test to check aerobic intensity

Moderate intensity

- You are breathing faster and your heart rate is elevated, but you are not out of breath.
- You can comfortably hold a conversation, but singing would be difficult.

Vigorous intensity

- Your breathing is deep and rapid, and your heart rate is significantly elevated.
- You can say only a few words before needing another breath.

Resistance exercise

Resistance training helps keep muscles and bones strong as you age, making it easier to climb stairs, carry groceries, get out of a chair, and lift grandchildren. It also helps prevent falls, protects joints, and supports independence for longer.

Build up gradually

- 1. Start.** Perform a short, full-body workout 1 day per week using light resistance bands or body weight. Begin with 3–4 exercises, complete 1 set of each, and rest 2–3 minutes between exercises.
- 2. Progress.** Over several weeks, increase to 2–3 full-body workouts per week, making sure to target all major muscle groups.
- 3. Advance.** Gradually increase to 2–3 sets of each exercise while maintaining 8–12 repetitions per set.
- 4. Goal.** Complete 2–3 full-body resistance sessions per week, targeting all major muscle groups with 2–3 sets of 8–12 repetitions per exercise.

Choose the right resistance

- The resistance is too light if you can perform many more than 12 repetitions.
- The resistance is too heavy if you cannot complete 8 repetitions with good form.
- The resistance is appropriate when the final 2–3 repetitions feel difficult and you can complete 8–12 repetitions in total.

When appropriate for your needs, begin with resistance bands before machines, and machines before free weights.

Balance and stability training

Balance and stability training improves control with balance, stepping, and functional movement. It can limit fall risk while boosting confidence and independence in older adults, and it is an important safety supplement to aerobic and resistance exercise.

Build up gradually

- 1. Start.** Practice 5–10 minutes of balance exercises, 2 days per week. Begin with static exercises, such as standing still, while using a sturdy countertop, chair, or other support.
- 2. Progress.** As balance improves, gradually reduce hand support. When you feel confident, progress to standing on one leg. Increase to 15 minutes, 2 times per week.
- 3. Advance.** Move to dynamic balance exercises, such as stepping or turning. Start with support and gradually reduce it as you become more comfortable.
- 4. Goal.** Build to 15–20 minutes of balance training at least 3 days per week, using progressively more challenging exercises as balance improves.

Signs that balance training is helping

- You need railings or furniture for support less often.
- You feel more confident on uneven surfaces, stairs, and curbs.
- You feel steadier while walking and more controlled while reaching.

Know when to stop

Stop exercising and consult a healthcare professional if you experience prolonged or sharp pain, severe fatigue, shortness of breath that persists at rest, chest pain, or sudden swelling in your legs.

Start safely

Fall action plan

A fall plan is just as important as trying to prevent falls. It helps someone know where you are, check on you if needed, and get help quickly if you are injured.

- Exercise in familiar locations when possible.
- Keep a phone with you, especially when exercising alone. Tell someone where you will exercise and when you expect to return.
- Carry identification or an emergency contact card with your healthcare provider's name and phone number.
- If you are prone to falls, consider a smartwatch or medical alert device that can notify an emergency contact.

If you fall

1. Stay calm and do not rush to stand up.
2. Check for injury. If you feel pain, cannot move part of your body, or hit your head, stay where you are and call 911 immediately.
3. If you feel okay, get up slowly using a sturdy chair, countertop, or other stable surface when available.
4. Tell a family member or caregiver and notify your healthcare provider, even if you feel fine. Documenting the fall can help identify changes that may prevent another fall.

General safety for all exercise types

- Create a clear, well-lit exercise space. Remove tripping hazards such as loose rugs and electrical cords.
- Wear supportive, non-slip shoes and stay aware of your surroundings.
- Exercise with family or friends when possible for added safety and motivation.
- Warm up for 5–10 minutes with gentle stretching and light aerobic movement.
- Stay hydrated, take breaks when needed, and choose activities that feel comfortable.
- Use a sturdy countertop, wall, or chair for support if you are concerned about balance. If you normally use a cane or walker, use it during exercise too.

More information

[Explore exercise guidance and resources from the UTHealth Houston Institute on Aging.](#)

You do not need a gym membership or personal trainer to become more active. Many safe aerobic, resistance, and balance activities can be performed at home.

Accessible edition of *Exercise: A Powerful Prescription*. Content has been reorganized for a clear reading sequence; the exercise and safety guidance follows the supplied source materials.