

FACT SHEET



Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

NATIONAL PHYSICAL ACTIVITY GUIDELINES

OLDER AUSTRALIANS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

It is never too late for Australians to become active and start benefiting from physical activity. For older Australians, physical activity can reduce the risk of falls, improve quality of life and manage and prevent disease. Being active can help slow the ageing process and enable older people to remain independent for longer.

The National Physical Activity Guidelines emphasise that physical activity need not be strenuous to be beneficial and 30 minutes can easily be accumulated by carrying out normal daily activities.

Health benefits of physical activity

Health benefits of physical activity include improved blood pressure, blood cholesterol, bone health and body weight and the prevention and management of chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, arthritis and osteoporosis.

Other noticeable benefits for older Australians of increased physical activity include: improved sleep and immune function, increased ability to perform physical tasks such as house and garden work, improved mental health including memory and mood, and maintained ability to undertake regular activities such as shopping, social outings and appointments.

As we age, a number of changes occur in the body that lead to a decline in its ability to function. Keeping active can help delay many effects of the ageing process. Heart and lung function and bone and muscle strength are heavily influenced by a person's level of physical activity.

Reduced risk of falls

A major benefit of maintaining physical activity into older age is the reduced risk of falls that cause injury. Falls often result in fractures, which can lead to long-term disability, and loss of confidence and independence. Physical activity improves balance, muscle strength and reduces risk of osteoporosis, the three biggest risk factors for falls. Falls among older Australians in 1998 resulted in nearly 1000 deaths and almost 50,000 hospitalisations.

Types of physical activity

The Guidelines recommend that all Australians accumulate at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most days. These 30 minutes need not be continuous; benefits can be achieved through one or a combination of activities such as getting off a bus before the final stop, playing with grandchildren, doing some gardening, dancing or swimming.

Australians can participate in a wide range of organised and individual activities including brisk walking, golf, bowls, dancing, tennis, swimming, tai chi, gardening, cycling and fishing.

Brisk walking is an excellent activity for people. It is enjoyable, inexpensive and requires little skill. Walking is a great social activity and can be enjoyed with friends. It carries a low risk of injury and it does not require a high level of fitness or special equipment.

Strength training (or resistance training) is also especially important for older adults, as are balancing and flexibility activities. Strength training is particularly important for helping muscles and bones stay strong. These activities can include lifting and carrying (groceries or small children), climbing stairs, weight training at a gym or at home and heavy yard work.

Balance and flexibility exercises are important to help improve or maintain your balance, thus reducing the risk of falls, and to help maintain your ability to undertake activities of daily living. These activities can include stretching exercises, tai chi, bowls, yoga, housework, dancing or gardening.

Safety considerations

Any person who has been previously inactive should gradually build up the intensity and length of physical activity. With proper warming-up, cooling-down, stretching, and supervision for the frail and very old, there is less chance of injury.



It is not necessary for people to consult a doctor before commencing gentle exercise. Medical advice should be sought by those who have health problems (such as heart disease, high blood pressure or diabetes) or who get symptoms such as light-headedness, dizziness or pain during physical activity.

For more information about Physical Activity and Health and to obtain a copy of the National Physical Activity Guidelines, please visit the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing's Nutrition and Physical Activity website at: <http://www.health.gov.au/pubhlth/strateg/active/index.htm>

For more information about Walk to Work Day, please visit the Walk to Work Day website at: www.walk.com.au

