

# Keeping active as we age

It's no secret that being physically active and keeping fit are essential to our overall wellbeing. It helps maintain good mental health and reduces the risk of all kinds of issues, including heart disease, stroke and some forms of cancer. It's also vital for strengthening muscles, bones and joints.

When we're young, regular exercise is integral to the development of the musculoskeletal system. Then, as we get older, it becomes an essential part of keeping the muscles, bones and joints strong and healthy. But as our bodies change over time, exercise can become more difficult to manage.

It's important that we understand these changes and learn to adapt accordingly. We're all built differently, but one thing that's true for all of us is that our muscles, bones and joints become weaker as we get older.

## MUSCLES

Over time, our muscles lose size and strength. They can become tighter and more rigid as the fibres shrink and replace themselves with tougher tissue.

Muscle fibres also start to replace themselves more slowly and our muscles can become less toned and less able to contract over time, which makes it difficult to build or maintain strength. This reduction in lean body mass can cause:

- fatigue
- loss of stamina
- poor balance
- increased risk of injury
- unhealthy weight gain.

## BONES

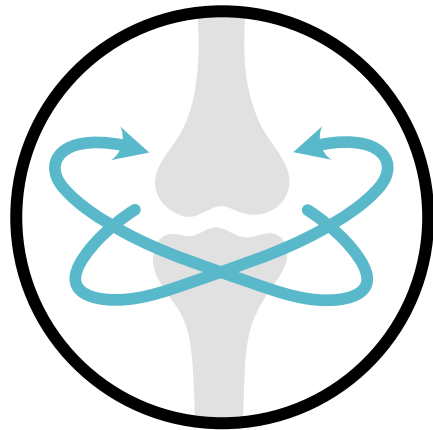
As we age, we lose bone mass and density. This can be caused by the loss of calcium and minerals from the bones, as well as hormonal changes and bone-wastage that occurs as a result of inactivity. Ultimately, as our bone mass reduces, our bones become weaker and more brittle, which leads to:

- osteoporosis
- an increased risk of broken bones
- poor posture and loss of height.

## JOINTS

Ageing joints can become stiffer and less flexible as time goes on. The amount of fluid that our joints need to stay lubricated decreases and their protective cartilage begins to break down. And, as muscles and ligaments tighten and become weaker, more strain is put on the joints. These changes can lead to:

- osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis
- inflammation, pain and stiffness
- injury, such as sprains or dislocation
- poor balance.



While changes to our muscles, bones and joints are inevitable, there's plenty you can do to help reduce the risk of injury and chronic pain. Inactivity is one of the main factors that contributes to bones and muscles losing their strength<sup>1</sup>, so exercise is key. Not only does it help improve your overall health, it also helps slow the rate of age-related decline.

You'll need to adapt the way you exercise as you get older. Here are a few guidelines to try and keep in mind:

- Try and do some kind of physical activity every day, even if it's just going for a walk or doing housework.
- At least twice a week, you should try and do exercises that improve strength, balance and flexibility e.g. carrying things such as shopping bags, walking in a straight line, stretching up and down such as high and low cupboards.
- The NHS advise to undertake at least 2.5 hours of moderate intensity activity per week, for example walking, cycling, water aerobics or dancing.<sup>2</sup>
- If you're already active and you feel physically able, do at least 75 minutes of vigorous exercise per week, or add in 150 minutes of moderate activity too.<sup>2</sup>
- Minimise the amount of time you spend sitting or lying down. And, when you're relaxing, break up long periods of inactivity by getting up and moving around.

<sup>1</sup> Keep bones healthy over 65 - [NHS](#)

<sup>2</sup> Physical activity guidelines for older adults - [NHS](#)

## EXERCISE DOs AND DON'Ts FOR THE OVER 60s

### DOs

#### **Make a plan**

Your muscles, bones and joints need to be looked after more and more as you get older. This can take careful planning and some research. It's a good idea to speak to your doctor or a qualified trainer for guidance to help build an exercise plan that's right for you.

#### **Start out lightly**

It's better to start off slowly and build from there than to risk injury by doing too much too soon. If you've been exercising for many years, you should be able to cope with more than a beginner, so there's not a one-size-fits-all plan and it could take some time to find the right level.

#### **Use weights**

Resistance-based exercise and weightlifting can help you build and maintain muscle mass. In some cases, it can slow the rate of muscle loss and help preserve strength, as well as help you feel more independent.

#### **Look after your joints**

Running and road cycling are great cardiovascular exercises, but they're high impact and can put pressure on your joints. As you get older, the best approach is to look after joints by switching to lower impact activities like swimming or cycling on a stationary bike.

### DON'Ts

#### **Do what you did when you were younger**

The frequency, intensity and goals of your exercise routine will need to adapt as you get older. Whether you're a beginner or you've been exercising all your life, you'll need to adjust your approach to exercise, both physically and mentally.

#### **Skip leg day**

Leg and core exercises can feel daunting, especially if you've fallen or you're worried about falling, but strengthening your legs and core will help make you feel more stable and confident on your feet. You just need to do it in a way that's safe and comfortable.

#### **Go too heavy**

Lifting heavy weights can be dangerous at any age. But as we get older, muscles won't be as strong or flexible as they once were and they're not able to regenerate as quickly. Consider lighter weights and resistance bands – particularly when you're starting out or returning from injury, and don't forget the importance of good form.

#### **Ignore aches and pains**

Listen to your body. If you're feeling drained, don't try and do too much, or if a particular part of the body is feeling sore, give it a rest. And, if pain or discomfort persists, make sure you see your GP.

## IMPROVING YOUR BALANCE

Maintaining your smaller, stabilising muscles with balance-specific exercises is also important as you get older. These should be factored into your routine alongside other activities. If you've not exercised for a while or you're returning from injury, focus on these fundamental movements to start with until you're confident enough to progress.

Some examples of stabilising movements include:

- one-leg stand
- shifting weight from side-to-side
- sideways walk
- stair climbs or step-ups
- heel-to-toe walk
- standing from a seated position unassisted.

The NHS recommends doing these kinds of exercises at least twice a week, in combination with anything else you're doing, and to always ensure you build up slowly.

Use a chair or wall to help stabilise yourself if needs be. Guidance on how to perform these and other exercises can be found on the [NHS website](#).



## STAYING FLEXIBLE

As the ageing process affects the flexibility of muscles and joints, it's important to build stretches and exercises into your routine to help reduce aches, relax joints and loosen muscles. This can also help delay or prevent the onset of arthritis and other diseases, but it's important to do it safely.

Flexibility exercises include:

- standing stretches (including leg, hip and side stretches)
- seated stretches (including neck, chest, knee and hip stretches)
- yoga
- pilates.

Speak to an expert or consult online guides to see how best to perform stretches – including the NHS website's [Flexibility exercises](#).

If you're relatively active and have an exercise routine that sees you undertaking moderate or high intensity activity, stretching is best done after a workout.

If you're less active, you should still try and move around before stretching so that muscles are warm. And finally, don't push too hard. You want to feel a low burn, so stop if you experience sharp or unusual pain.

As with any lifestyle change, if you have a medical condition or you're unsure about anything, speak to a GP before you get started. Particularly if you've not exercised for a long time. It's important to make sure the activities you undertake, and their intensity levels, are appropriate for your health and fitness.

# PHC's physical health services

## Fitness Offers

Everyone's route to better health and fitness is different.

With our latest gym offers, you're not tied down to one venue. There's even an online-only fitness option, giving you the flexibility to look after your health and wellbeing in the way that works for you.

## Health Support

Access to medical teams, including nurses and a wide variety of health professionals, to answer any questions you may have.

The health support service does not diagnose conditions or prescribe medication, and is not designed to replace your GP.

## Health Assessments

It can be difficult to find your route to wellbeing. Our assessments make it easy for you to see where to focus your efforts, and how even small steps can add up to great strides, making it easier to keep going and aim further. As part of your healthcare cover, you are entitled to 25% off, on a range of Nuffield Health or Circle Health Group health assessments (terms and conditions apply).

## Muscles, Bones and Joints Support service

As part of your healthcare cover, we offer an enhanced route to care for muscle, bone and joint problems. You can take control of how, when and with who you access advice. A simple to use, clinically designed online assessment directs you to the right clinician without the need for a GP referral\* and the online portal, available 24/7, enables you to book your own appointments with the right practitioner at the right time. It also holds your medical notes, bespoke exercise plans and any imaging you've had during follow-up appointments, and you can download your medical notes and referrals for your records.\*\*

*\*Subject to the terms, conditions and the underwriting terms applied to your cover. For example, if you are covered on moratorium underwriting, we may require some further information from your registered GP in order to assess whether your claim is eligible.*

*\*\*Online appointments through this service do not affect out-patient limits, excess or the number of physiotherapy sessions members are entitled to as part of their health scheme. However, these will be applied for any onward, face-to-face treatment.*