

# 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
- 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 do's and don'ts for the over 60s

### Do's

#### 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.

# PHC'S HEALTH AND WELLBEING SERVICES

When you decide it's the right time for you to take the next steps, we're here for you. We offer a range of physical health services available to you as part of your healthcare cover with PHC. Find out more about what these services include and how to access them.

## Muscles, bones and joints support service

If you are tired of putting up with aches and pains, and long GP waiting times, you can get telephone or video access to our expert physiotherapy service without the need for a GP referral. You can benefit from hassle-free phone or video consultations in a location that suits, and reassurance in having all the follow-up support needed.

*This service is available to members aged 18 and over only.*

### How to access

Call the PHC claims line on **0800 068 7111** or email **[claims@thephc.co.uk](mailto:claims@thephc.co.uk)**.

They'll check you're covered and provide you with a link to the service.

Please have your membership number ready when you call - this can be found on your Certificate of Cover.

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## Fitness offers

Are you finding it difficult to commit to the gym? Do you struggle with finding time to work out? Everyone's route to better health and fitness is different.

You and your partner or spouse will receive a 40% discount on a variety of health and wellbeing facilities such as spas, gyms, and more, via Hussle and Nuffield Health (terms and conditions apply).

### How to access

To redeem or to see the latest offers, visit **[thephc.co.uk/gym-discount/](https://thephc.co.uk/gym-discount/)**

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## 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).

### How to access

To get started, please visit **[thephc.co.uk/health-assessments/](https://thephc.co.uk/health-assessments/)**

