



# Active Living Tips for Older Adults

Practical, leading edge research results applied to physical activity for older adults, in plain language for health practitioners and leaders.  
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## Aerobic Fitness for Older Adults

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**R**esearch tells us that exercise is good for all older people. Aerobic exercise is especially good. It helps older adults move more easily and feel better. Even people in their 90s can improve their aerobic fitness.

Older adults who are fit are likely to have a better quality of life and to live longer. If we lose fitness, daily tasks such as housework and gardening tire us out. When we feel strained or too tired, we stop doing these tasks. Then we can start to decline, doing less, getting less fit and weaker, and you end up doing even less activity. We can end up needing others to help with the simple daily tasks of living on our own.

### What is aerobic fitness?

It means how well your body can work or exercise for two minutes or longer. To get aerobically fit you need to practice moving large muscles such as those in our legs, trunk, and shoulders while you breathe heavily.

### How do we keep or improve aerobic fitness?

You can keep or improve your aerobic fitness by doing regular aerobic exercise because:

- It works large muscle groups in the legs,

body, and arms.

- It is important for useful movements, preferably weight bearing (such as walking).
- Aerobic exercise movements are hard enough to be challenging yet easy enough to be enjoyable.

You should choose different activities to make exercise more interesting and fun. Good choices for older adults are:

- Walking briskly indoors or out
- Jogging or running or walking or a combination of the three
- Cycling on a bicycle, adult's tricycle, or stationary bike
- Rowing in a boat or on a rowing machine
- Dancing that keeps you moving briskly
- Callisthenics (Aerobics)
- Swimming
- Aquarobics – aerobics in the water
- Cross-country skiing
- Snowshoeing



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## ***A safe start to exercise***

Generally, you can exercise safely if you start at an easy level and slowly work up to a harder level. Talk to your doctor before you start if you have not exercised for some time or if you want to try a harder exercise. In most cases you can start right away. The doctor might tell you to exercise in other ways if you are not ready for aerobic exercise.

## ***How much is enough?***

Research clearly shows that older adults can improve their fitness by doing 30 minutes or more of continuous aerobic activity on most days of the week. If you are new to exercise and not sure how much you can do:

- Start by exercising two or three times a day for 10 – 15 minutes.
- Try to do a total of 30 minutes of aerobic exercise each day.
- Progress by slowly exercising longer until you are doing 45 – 60 minutes most days.

## ***How hard should you work?***

First, practice until you are exercising most days of the week for 45 – 60 minutes in one session. Then exercise a little harder or faster to get the most good from your exercise. When asked to walk “*briskly*,” most people choose a pace that improves aerobic fitness. Next time you walk for exercise, ask yourself, “*Am I walking briskly?*”

If you still wonder how hard to exercise, you can use one of these:

- A simple “talk” or Just Audible Breathing (JAB) test. Gradually work harder until you can first hear your breath “*huff and puff*” and it is hard to talk without taking a breath.
- Exercise Target Heart Rates (THR). Your heart beats faster as you exercise harder. You can exercise effectively by exercising hard enough to reach a target heart rate for “moderate to vigorous exercise.” Each person’s heart rate may be different because of age, health, medications, or other factors. Ask your fitness leader or health practitioner to determine your target heart rates for

exercise. You monitor your heart rate by taking your pulse during exercise. If you feel that you are exercising too hard or not hard enough using a target heart rate based on just your age, you should probably use the Just Audible Breathing (JAB) method or the Rating of Perceived Exertion (RPE) method.

- The Rating of Perceived Exertion (RPE) scale can also be a good indicator of how hard your body is working. You may want to consult your fitness leader or health practitioner about using this method. Aim for an effort between 4 and 7 out of 10, or “somewhat strong to very strong” to improve aerobic fitness.

## ***Every little bit helps***

Many older adults have some health problems such as arthritis, osteoporosis, or diabetes. If you have a health problem, it can affect your choice of exercise. For example, if you have joint or balance problems, you might prefer water sports such as swimming or aquarobics. If you can’t go out, you can exercise at home by walking or even by marching in place. Even people who are confined to bed can get equipment to help them exercise. Regardless, exercising does you good. And as you get stronger and more fit, you can do more or different exercises to keep interested and get even fitter. Aerobic exercise is one of the main ways you can keep yourself independent.

Some people might be worried about exercising too hard. But research clearly shows that aerobic exercise:

- Reduces the risk of disease
- Makes you fitter even in old age
- Makes daily activities easier
- Helps you to go on living on your own

Exercise allows you to live an active life with more vigour and to enjoy a better quality of life.

*Health practitioners, leaders and others please post, copy and distribute this article to older adults*

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