

Lifespan vs. health span

Why should I keep exercising in my golden years? What's the right way to do it?

With age comes physical limitations. But it's important to stay active, says [John Rinker, MD](#), an internal medicine physician who specializes in geriatrics at OSF HealthCare. When you keep moving, it helps reduce the risk of things like diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, cancer and neurocognitive diseases like Alzheimer's.

In other words, Dr. Rinker says, it's not fun to live long if you're not well. Your lifespan versus your health span, as he puts it.

"It really, really pays to maintain exercise and be in good physical shape as you age. It reaps huge dividends on how long you live," Dr. Rinker stresses.

Guidelines

Each person should have a tailored plan as advised by a health care provider. But regardless of your age, the American Heart Association (AHA) generally recommends 150 minutes of moderate physical activity or 70 minutes of vigorous physical activity each week, spread out over several days. A brisk walk would qualify as moderate intensity (also called zone two training), while running, swimming or riding a bike would be vigorous. Vigorous exercise is associated with a term called VO2 max, referring to maximum use of oxygen. In layman's terms, you're breathing hard and conditioning the heart.

"Most of that type of [vigorous] training is at a higher interval. You're going to get breathing really hard for three to five minutes while you sustain a pace that's rather difficult. Then you're going to rest and let that heart rate come back down. Then go back to the hard exercise," Dr. Rinker explains. "That back and forth with the heart rate really helps to train how well your heart can pump blood to muscles. That's a really good marker of how well conditioned you are."

The AHA also recommends two days of strength training per week. That could be lifting weights, using resistance bands or calisthenics, where you use your body weight for resistance rather than equipment.

"I really like the strength training piece," Dr. Rinker says.

"It doesn't take a lot as you age to tension a muscle enough to maintain muscle mass. We really find that people who are able to maintain more muscle mass as they age are going to do much better with those health span and lifespan issues," he adds. "So, the goal isn't to make everyone a huge bodybuilder. The goal is to decrease the rate of decline as we age."

On the days you do strength training, aim for 30 minutes per day. Dr. Rinker says if you really want to lean into this area of fitness, consider getting a personal trainer.

Limitations

It's important to work around your ability and not push through pain, Dr. Rinker says. If aging has brought back or leg pain, skip the treadmill and try swimming or a weightlifting session while seated.

"You want to make sure you're not going to injure something further. That will create a bigger setback or other deficits that are not going to help you in the long run," Dr. Rinker says.

The bottom line

From VO2 max to zone two to calisthenics, there are a lot of terms to keep straight. If you don't want to overthink it, just remember to keep moving. Push yourself with some vigorous workouts if you can, but commit to *some* form of exercise regularly.

"Most of your day-to-day exercise [as an older adult] should be just basic activity," Dr. Rinker says. "Think of a brisk walk. Walking at a pace for about 30 minutes where you could still hold a conversation with somebody, but it would be difficult to sing a song.

"If I can just get someone to walk every day, I think they're going to be in good shape," he adds.

Learn more

Read more about [moving your body safely](#) and [aging well](#) on the OSF HealthCare website.