



Never

Seniors are finding a healthier, fuller life through exercise.

Too Late

BY KEVIN ALLMAN

Jupiterimages.

Even if you've never been in a gym before, your body will take to exercise — regardless of your age.

Is it ever too late to get active?

Certainly there are senior role models in the world of fitness: Jack LaLanne, now well into his 90s, continues to preach the gospel of good health. And Jane Fonda, who turns 70 later this year, still markets her own workout DVDs and tapes. Few of us, of course, can have the bodies of Jack LaLanne or Jane Fonda — at any age. But that's no excuse not to get active.

The biggest barrier for most seniors, according to the experts we spoke to, is their own self-doubt. Fitness equipment can be intimidating. Some people are afraid of doing something wrong and making their bodies worse. Others see gyms as unfriendly places: the complicated machines, the youth-oriented music and revealing clothes, the hard bodies.

And then there's the ultimate question: After years of inactivity, is it too late to make a positive change? According to doctors, scientists and fitness experts, the answer is no.

Get the Facts

"Change is the biggest obstacle for seniors," says Mackie Shilstone, a fitness expert whose new book, *Lean and Hard* (Wiley, 2007), is all about working out effectively. "It's all fear — a fear of being out of touch, a fear of being out of control. And at some point, older people look at the return on their investment and wonder, *What exactly do I hope to gain at this point in my life?*"

workout essentials

SHOES: Don't be confused by the wide variety of athletic shoes out there. According to sports-medicine expert Melinda Manore, PhD, RD, as long as shoes are good quality, fit properly and have adequate support, you don't need to buy the highest-end sneakers. If in doubt, look for shoes marked "cross-trainers." Avoid black-soled shoes; most gyms accept white soles only.

CLOTHING: Comfortable, loose-fitting clothing in a natural (breathable) fabric such as cotton is best. Sweatshirts and sweat-pants are good for staying warm. For those with mobility

issues, a zippered tracksuit can be easier than conventional gym clothes.

VITAMINS: A basic multivitamin is good; a multivitamin designed for seniors is better. Calcium (for bones) and magnesium (to prevent muscle cramps) are also good.

WATER: Lots of it. Seniors are at higher risk for dehydration because their bodies are less equipped to respond to external temperature changes. Keeping the water habit even when you're not working out is good health — and good sense.

PARTNER: As Manore says, "It's a lot harder to skip your exercise if your partner is waiting." Older Americans are at greater risk for isolation and depression, so working out with others can have physical *and* mental benefits.

MUSIC: While a music player is optional, it can make a workout easier and more fun. Try one out to see if you like it before buying. Not a member of the iPod generation? Enlist a younger person (perhaps a grandchild) to help you select and load a music player with your own favorite songs.



Quite a lot, according to Shilstone — and according to scientists. Two new studies about the benefits of exercise for seniors make it clear that getting active has proven, measurable benefits.

Strength training may help your heart and lessen chances of a stroke. The first study, conducted in Japan and reported in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, examined the effect of strength training on the arteries of older people. The 12-week study of leg training among men in their 60s found that the exercise increased arterial function. While the researchers cautioned that they couldn't draw any definite correlation between strength training and preventing heart attacks or stroke, the study's author did conclude, "The results suggest that resistance training in older adults would produce beneficial effects on the vasculature without any unfavorable effects."

Another study, examining sedentary people between ages 70 and 89 who were just beginning their exercise programs, found that those who embarked on a regimen of endurance, strengthening, flexibility and balance training demonstrated significant promise in maintaining walking ability. "This research suggests that a multifaceted program of aerobic, strength, balance and flexibility exercises can make a difference for older adults," says Jack M. Guralnik, MD, PhD, of the National Institute on Aging, the group that sponsored the study.



Abby King, PhD, professor at the Stanford University School of Medicine, was part of the endurance-training study, and she offered what was perhaps the best answer to the question "Why exercise?"

"When you ask seniors what they are most afraid of, they often don't put cancer or other specific age-related diseases at the top of the list — they say loss of independence," she notes.

Get Serious

Mackie Shilstone has worked with professional athletes as well as ordinary people recovering from heart disease and other infirmities. Her message? "Mortality is inevitable. Morbidity is not. Ask yourself how you want to die, and that will tell you how you should live. Do you want to be active until the end of your life, or do you want to spend your last years as an invalid? Do you want to maintain your independence, or have to depend on other people? If you want to stay active and independent, start preparing for it now by exercising, the same way you'd put money in a savings account.

"It's never too late to start exercising," Shilstone adds. "Think of the practical benefits. You have to think of this as training for old age. You want to be able to get up and down stairs. You want to be able to get the top off a bottle of medication.

"Just for starters, you want to be able to get out of a chair," he continues. "You need good muscle function in order to maintain independence and avoid assisted living. Men need pushing and pulling strength. Women need handgrip strength — even their clothing is more complicated than a man's. Just the act of getting up and out of a chair gets more difficult as you get older."

Shilstone sees exercise in practical terms. "What's the greatest injury that can happen to old people?" he asks. "Falling. About 25% of hip fractures result in death, usually due to complications like pneumonia. And as we age, our steps shorten, and so does our stride length. If you're out of shape, you take shorter steps, and each step brings increased potential for falling and trauma. That in itself is a reason to stay in good physical condition as long as you can. It's preventive medicine."

Get Motivated

Melinda Manore, PhD, RD, is a nutritionist and expert in sports medicine at Oregon State University. When the topic of motivation is raised, she laughs. "My biggest problem with seniors is just knocking down all their excuses," she says. "You've just got to do it. It doesn't matter if it's raining, or if you have other things to do, or if you just don't feel like it. You've got to set a routine and stick to it."

Maintaining your independence as you age is one of the most valuable rewards of exercise.



Finding physical activity that's fun and not a chore will help you stick to a regular exercise routine.



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— Mackie Shilstone

Her No. 1 tip? “Get a workout partner. You’re much less likely to blow it off if you know there’s someone waiting for you or depending on you. And since seniors are at higher risk for depression, use working out as a social occasion.”

Manore is also an advocate for finding a workout plan that you look forward to, rather than one that’s a chore. “Try a lot of different things: swimming, walking, weight training. If you enjoy it, you’re more likely to stick with it.”

Get Vitamins

Should you be taking vitamins? Yes, whether you’re exercising or not, says Christine Horner, MD, a Taos, N.M.-based personal trainer and expert in natural health. “If you can take a good multivitamin with minerals every day, that’s enough for most people,” she says. “In addition to a multivitamin, seniors should take a calcium supplement for bone health, but no megadoses of calcium. If you sweat like crazy, you might want to take a little extra magnesium, which can be lost during perspiration, and it can help prevent muscle cramping.”

For those who want to know more about supplements, Horner recommends learning about whole-food vitamins. “Vitamins that are derived from whole foods are absorbed and used by the body better than synthetic vitamins. If a vitamin is made from real foods, it’ll say that on the label.”

Should an exerciser take higher doses of vitamins? No, says Horner. “The recommended dietary allowance of vitamins isn’t different for

an active person. But some of the water-soluble vitamins, particularly B5 and B12, have shown some results in raising energy levels, so it’s fine to take additional doses of them. Vitamins A, D, E and K are fat-soluble, which means you don’t want to take megadoses of them, as they tend to stay in the body. Water-soluble vitamins — B complex and C — aren’t stored in the body, but flushed out.”

Get Started

So you’re convinced that you need to get active, but you’re not sure where to begin. Here are a few places to get started.

⚡ **YOUR DOCTOR.** Any exercise or diet regimen should begin with a doctor’s consultation. Most physicians will have helpful handouts and even exercise routines that can be tailored to your specific medical history.

⚡ **A SENIOR CENTER.** Many municipal senior centers have on-site exercise programs for a variety of comfort levels, which are excellent for easing into an exercise routine with other motivated people. Your instructor is also a good resource for answering questions and helping you plan a comfortable routine.

⚡ **CHURCH.** Many churches, synagogues and other places of worship have senior workout programs. You don’t have to be a member to join. If your church doesn’t have a senior exercise program, consider suggesting one.

⚡ **SILVER SNEAKERS.** This nationwide program offers free gym memberships for its members, along with customized workout programs, health-education seminars, and access to special advisors versed in senior health issues. Best of all, it’s free for people in many Medicare plans and Medicare supplement carriers. For eligibility, call 888-423-4632 (toll-free), or visit the group’s Web site (www.silversneakers.com).

Get Active!

Ready to get active? Remember these words from Shilstone: “Think of all the things you’ve already accomplished in your life ... all the challenges you’ve faced. If you can do those things, you can do this.”

So while a Jane Fonda tummy or a Jack LaLanne torso may be an unrealistic goal, good health is not. As the population ages, the research is getting clearer: Structured physical exercise can be a boon to seniors’ health, happiness and longevity — and it’s never too late to get started. ▢

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