

Staying Active



Preparing for your retirement: Workbook Three



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Health | Santé

Staying Active: Physically, mentally, and socially

Retirement may be a time for reducing your work activity but that shouldn't stop you from remaining active physically, mentally, and socially. Quite the opposite, in fact. To enjoy the best retirement years possible, it's important to take steps to ensure that you remain physically healthy, keep your mind sharp, and keep up your social connections. When you invest time and energy into being active in these domains, you increase the likelihood that you'll remain healthy and able to pursue whatever your retirement goals and dreams are.

What can you expect if you remain active as you age?

Near the beginning of the 20th century, the average 65-year-old could expect to live another 13.3 years. Nowadays, life expectancy is much longer and a 65-year-old person retiring today can expect to live about 20 more years. Keep in mind that these are averages, and a healthy, active person may expect to live a life free of serious health concerns for many years beyond that.

Physical changes

- One of the inevitable changes of aging is weight gain (for most people). This happens because your metabolism slows about 5% for every decade after age 30. This means that if you keep expending the same amount of energy day-to-day, and eat the same amounts and types of foods day after day, you'll get heavier. It's just the way the body works. So to prevent weight gain from happening you either have to increase your activity level as you age or reduce your caloric intake. The best solution for most people is to be certain to have a moderate amount of exercise each day, and eat nutritious and balanced meals (without skipping breakfast).
- Endurance decreases with age. You might be able to swim laps or go on long hikes at age 60, but you'll probably find it more challenging than when you were 16. That said, endurance is something you can influence. For example, brisk walking for 30 minutes or more each day can help you maintain your physical stamina and prevent premature lessening of endurance.
- We become more susceptible to a wider range of health problems as we age (e.g. cardiovascular vulnerability, musculoskeletal fragility) but you can prevent many of these changes from occurring prematurely simply by changing your behaviour. Many of the health problems you encounter with age are accelerated by poor behavioural choices (e.g., smoking, drinking too much alcohol, not exercising, overeating or making poor food choices). When you put effort towards maintaining your health, you significantly increase your chances of living longer, healthier, and remaining independent for as long as possible.

Mental changes

- Researchers have found that among older adults, the more physically active you are, and the more you challenge yourself mentally (e.g., by reading, learning, teaching) the more likely you are to preserve your memory, problem-solving, and planning skills. Even the incidence of dementia is lower in adults who stay active in their retirement years.

Mood changes

- If you allow yourself to become isolated during retirement and as you age, you can expect your mood to be negatively affected. Sometimes this negative mood can develop into a serious emotional disorder: depression.
- Being active not only strengthens your body, it also makes you feel good about yourself. When you are physically fit, socially connected, and your mind is sharp, you can accomplish your daily tasks and your retirement goals with greater ease and less fatigue.

About Healthy Aging

A lot of the negative associations that we have with aging aren't due to aging itself, but to the eventual result of poor maintenance. Aging is just a natural progression of life. It's a wear and tear from external and internal sources. You can't avoid it, but you can certainly influence many aspects of aging progress and how strong and vital you remain in older age.

Just as you need to add oil and gas to your car and run the engine every now and then, you have physical, mental, and social maintenance needs. You can only ignore these needs for so long before wear and tear starts to show.

Some quick maintenance tips for a longer, healthier life:

- Get good sleep. For most people this is 7-9 hours each night.
- Keep your weight at a healthy level for you. If you don't know what that is, talk to your health care provider.
- Exercise regularly. This should be a combination of something aerobic (e.g., walking briskly), some weight bearing activity (e.g., lifting weights), and some stretching and flexibility exercises (particularly those that involve activities to improve your balance, e.g., yoga or Tai Chi).
- If you smoke, **stop**. Smoking will not only shorten the duration of your life, but the quality of your later years as well (e.g., smoking is one of the major contributors of premature cardiovascular disease, stroke, and lung disease).
- Eat small meals regularly throughout the day and be certain you're getting recommended daily amounts of vitamins, minerals, protein, fluids, etc. Avoid adding salt to food (or minimize how much you add) and avoid saturated and Trans fats when possible.
- If you drink alcohol, limit yourself to a drink or two each day.
- Eat a healthy diet. A healthy diet is essential to feeling well and enjoying life to the fullest. Recent surveys show that most older adults do not eat enough grain and milk products, vegetables and fruits. Eating too little of these foods can leave you tired, more prone to illness, and at increased risk of heart disease, cancer, diabetes and osteoporosis.
- Follow the advice of other parts of this course (maintain positive relationships, do something with your life that contributes meaning and value, keep challenging yourself mentally).

What are your goals for your health and well-being in the retirement years that you have ahead of you?

What do you think will be the most challenging obstacles that you will encounter that might prevent you from achieving these health goals (e.g., I am a smoker)?

What can you begin to do immediately to help overcome these obstacles and/or to prevent them from occurring?

Four Kinds of Exercise

1. Aerobic exercise

Generally, aerobic exercises contain rhythmic and sustained motion that elevate your heart rate and breathing. Some examples of aerobic activity are:

- Walking at a rapid pace;
- Jogging or running;
- Swimming;
- Biking;
- Dancing;
- Cross country skiing or snowboarding; And,
- Many sports depending on how they are played (e.g., playing in a manner that generates sweat and not just because it is hot outside)

List 5 aerobic activities you can participate in.

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2. Muscle strengthening

The classic image of muscle strengthening to many people is the body builder or weight lifter, with notably developed musculature. Although this image is a goal for some people, for most retirees, some of the goals of muscle strengthening are:

- Strengthening your bones to help prevent fractures;
- Improving your circulation;
- Speeding up your metabolism to help you manage your weight;
- Assisting with better bowel and bladder control;
- Improving your self-image; And,
- Strengthening small muscles and ligaments that help stabilize your joints.

You can strength train in your own home with weights of varying sizes or performing exercises that use your own body weight to increase the 'load' on your muscles (e.g., pushups). And you don't have to lift a heavy weight to benefit. Small weights and/or resistance bands, when used properly, can be very effective at strengthening your musculature.

Whether you are experienced with muscle strengthening, or not, always be smart about what you are doing. If you feel pain, or you aren't getting the results you hope for, or you simply don't feel confident that you are performing an exercise properly, stop what you are doing and get advice. And remember to work at strengthening your whole body (legs, arms, back, shoulders, abdominals, etc.).

A good way to get started with muscle strengthening is by joining a class or taking one-on-one training at a local gym or community fitness center. Even better? Work out with your spouse, partner, or a friend.

What are three ways that you can learn more about muscle strengthening (e.g., pick up a community centre catalogue and look for classes, visit a local gym)?

3. Flexibility

Loss of flexibility is an avoidable symptom of aging.

- Gentle stretching of your neck, shoulders, back, and hips will help you maintain flexibility.
- Try to correct your posture so that you are not hunched over when sitting or walking.
- When stretching, don't bounce up and down to stretch the muscle further, or push yourself past a slight point of tension. If you do either of these things, you'll get injured.
- Consider trying an instructor-led stretching class but be certain that the leader is respectful of any limitations you may have from pre-existing physical injuries, limitations of your mobility, and/or your age.
- Typically, a stretch is held for about 15 to 20 seconds. Then you release the stretch for 15 or 20 seconds, and repeat the stretch. Five to ten minutes a day of stretching can keep you limber and help you maintain correct posture.

What are three ways that you can learn more about flexibility training (e.g., pick up a community centre catalogue and look for classes, visit a local gym)?

4. Balance

Balance is something that most of us don't appreciate until we lose it. And losing balance is one of the reasons that fall-related hospital admissions number in the hundreds of thousands each year in North America.

Balance is something that you can maintain (and improve) as you age. There's a lot of overlap between strength and balance exercises. Basically, lower body exercises for strength will help you with balance.

What are three ways that you can learn more about balance training (e.g., pick up a community centre catalogue and looks for classes, visit a local gym)?

Create your plan

The specifics of a good, comprehensive physical activity plan are beyond the scope of this course. The focus here is to alert you to areas you need to put effort towards maintaining and improving: aerobic exercise, muscle strengthening, flexibility, and balance. For more information, consult your doctor for suggested resources, visit your library and choose a book about fitness and aging, or visit reliable and informative websites such as those listed in the 'Resources' section of this course.

About Rest and Relaxation

Just as activity is a component of healthy aging, so is rest (e.g., sleep).

Sleep is just as critical to life as food and water are. You probably get enough food (or maybe too much) but do you get enough sleep? For most people, 7-9 hours of uninterrupted sleep each night is a good goal.

Sleep complaints are often heard from older persons but aging, itself, is not usually the cause. Probably the biggest factor that negatively impacts sleep is being sedentary and not getting enough exercise.

Another factor that can impair sleep, especially for a retiree, is lack of consistent sleep and wake times. Most employees are expected to be at work at a certain time each day. This means that, as employees, we develop a habit of going to bed at a certain time each work night, and getting out of bed the same time each work day. Do this routinely and eventually your body adapts its sleep-wake cycle. If you change this routine when you retire, your body may have trouble adapting. You might not stay up beyond when your body is tired and wanting to sleep. Or you may sleep in past the time that you could have arisen.

Another problem some retirees encounter with sleep is that they aren't actually tired when they go to bed. If you aren't staying physically active and busy all day long, you might not feel tired when you go to sleep.

Still more sleep problems occur if you have retired but don't have a retirement plan in place that you are comfortable with. You might have worrisome thoughts racing through your head when you attempt to sleep. That's a recipe for insomnia.

Another possibility is that your mood may be low or you are feeling depressed. One hallmark of depression is sleep disruption.

The best advice? Stay active and try to establish a regular schedule of waking and going to bed. Stick to that schedule just as you've had to stick to a schedule through your working years. And if thoughts are troubling you, make a list so that you can review and plan how you'll deal with whatever situations are giving rise to these thoughts. If low mood may be the issue, it could be something that will resolve when you get more active and pursue more pleasurable and rewarding experiences (but if low mood persists more than a few weeks, it's important to seek professional help).

Some tips to help you sleep better

- You should have a routine before bedtime so your body becomes conditioned to expect that it is time to sleep.
- Don't consume stimulants before going to bed (e.g. coffee, chocolate, nicotine).
- Don't go to bed with a full bladder. Avoid heavy exercise before bedtime.
- Don't eat a big meal just before bed.
- Try to avoid long naps during the day. It's okay to have a brief nap (e.g. 15 minutes) but anything longer might interfere with your nighttime sleeping pattern.
- Deal with any concerns that are giving rise to thoughts that prevent you from sleeping.

What are three ways that you can change your behaviour to improve the likelihood of a good sleep?

Keep Your Mind Active

Equally important as rigorous physical activity, rigorous mental exercise keeps your mind in tip top shape.

In many ways, your brain is a kind of trainable organ and needs exercise as any muscle does. When you challenge your mental capacities through various activities (see below) you increase various kinds of physiological activity in your brain and give it just the kind of exercise it needs.

Some examples of mentally stimulating activities:

- Learn something (e.g., take a class). It could be a hobby or even a trade/skill;
- Keep a daily journal;
- Research and write for an online or print publication;
- Build a web site or a create a blog;
- Do crossword puzzles;
- Play competitive bridge or chess; Or,
- Research places to travel and visit there, introducing yourself to new things.

What are five ways that *you* can keep your mind more active during your retirement?

Staying Socially Active

Staying socially active in retirement is a key to your happiness and fulfillment. Research has even shown that frequent interactions with family and friends or volunteering can delay or prevent many age-related changes (e.g., memory loss).

Staying socially active when you retire can be a challenge. You may have had a strong support network through your workplace, but what happens when you no longer see coworkers on a daily basis? What happens if you decide to live abroad? How will you see your friends when you can no longer drive yourself or get around independently?

Since loneliness and isolation are major threats to your happiness in retirement, make sure you work hard at reaching out and connecting with others and that you plan for the impact that retirement may have on your social network. Here are some tips:

- Connect regularly with friends and family. Spend time with the people you enjoy and who make you feel upbeat. Even if you aren't able to visit in person, call or write or e-mail them to keep your relationships fresh and current.
- Put effort into making new friends. Make it a point to befriend people, including people who are younger than you (younger friends can energize you and help you see life from a new perspective).
- Spend time with at least one person every day. You shouldn't be alone day after day.
- One of the best ways to feel accomplished and useful is through volunteering. Researchers have found that happy people tend to participate more in community organizations, are more liked by others, are less likely to get divorced and tend to live longer. As well, they tend to be less self-focused, more loving, more energetic, and less vulnerable to diseases and premature death.

Which people or groups do you want to stay in touch with during your retirement?

For each of the people or groups who you have identified, what are five ways that you can keep these relationships strong and solid?

Person/Group:

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Person/Group:

Person/Group:

Derek and Janet make plans to stay active

Derek and Janet are both active but in different ways.

Derek's construction job is physically demanding; Janet's regular exercise classes keep her fit (she does a combination of aerobics, stretching, and resistance training 3 or 4 times each week).

When Derek retires he won't be as active as he is right now. So he has to plan for some kind of regular activity that he'll enjoy doing. He knows that occasional renovation work at his home, or for others, will be physically challenging, but that work can be sporadic and it doesn't meet the definition of good physical activity as outlined in this workbook (it's not aerobic, and it's not regular).

Janet suggests that he could start going to the gym with her and she can arrange a personal training session so he can start becoming more active, and learn how to stay more fit. He thinks this is a great idea partly because he enjoys physically challenging activities, it's going to help him stay more fit, and he gets to spend time with Janet even if they aren't doing the same thing when they're at the gym.

In terms of mental activities, both Derek and Janet agree that doing part-time work will be challenging. And if they want more mental challenges, they plan to approach their local community center and find out how they can create a workshop for others that want to learn their trade. That way they can teach others what they've learned (Derek will teach construction skills and Janet will teach a writing course).

In terms of social activities, Derek knows that he is going to have more of a challenge than Janet. He doesn't want to have a lot of new friends, but he wants to keep the friends he's made through work. So he's going to take it upon himself to plan new camping and fishing sites for he and his buddies to go to throughout the year.

Janet's social connections are separate from work (her family and her neighbours) and she already participates in a book-reading club, she does online blogging (i.e. sharing ideas with others in her profession using the internet), and she has her friends at the gym. But she's going to plan some kind of volunteer activity that will see her expand her social circle even more. She hopes it will be something that both she and Derek will do, because she wants to be certain they share some friends and social activities.