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Health

Late Boomers: A Workout Guide for First Timers

By Katherine Hobson

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Sure, the baby boomers made *The Complete Book of Running* a bestseller, they were the first to use the Nautilus machines at the gym, and they sweated in front of their VCRs to Jane Fonda. Yet not everyone was part of the revolution; after all, only about 30 percent of American adults report getting [regular exercise](#). But forming a workout habit in middle age—or beyond—still has a host of benefits. "We were designed to be mobile—aging in a sedentary way is new to us," says Vonda Wright, director of the Performance and Research Initiative for Masters Athletes at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. Here's what you need to know about starting up a routine.

Realize that it's not too late. "The human body is very responsive," says Edward Coyle, director of the Human Performance Laboratory at the University of Texas–Austin. He studied a group of men with an average age of about 55 who were heart-attack survivors. The first six months of training was spent getting the men walking again, to be sure their hearts could tolerate exercise. Then they progressed over the next year until they were training five days a week, running or biking 40 to 60 minutes a day. The last six months was spent raising the intensity through interval training.

And at the end of two years, not only did their heart function improve; the men ran a 5-mile St. Patrick's Day Race and did just as well as 55-year-olds who didn't have a history of heart attack, averaging between 7:40 and 8 minutes a mile. "They ran faster than when they were 30," says Coyle.

Check with your doctor first. If you want to start a workout routine but haven't exercised regularly for six months, get your physician's all-clear first. This is boilerplate advice—but follow it. The risk of heart disease increases markedly for men in their mid-40s and women about a decade later, and exertion can trigger heart attacks in people with no previous symptoms. So your doctor might want to give you a stress test or talk to you about other risk factors you might have.

Start with something you enjoy. Why plan to finish a 5K if you don't like to run? "There's no cookbook" for the perfect routine, says Joseph Scott, an athletic trainer who's a team leader at the Sports Performance & Orthopedic Rehab Team at Southcoast Hospital Group in North Dartmouth, Mass. If you like to run, by all means, do it. But if you'd rather be swimming (or cycling, or walking, or ballroom dancing, or playing badminton ...), do that instead. Then build your longer-term plans around activities you like.

Vary your routine. No single activity is perfect, says Nicholas DiNubile, a Havertown, Pa.-based orthopedic surgeon and author of *FrameWork*, a guide to developing a sustainable exercise routine. If all you do is run, you'll work certain areas so hard you risk tightening and possible injury (hamstrings, calves) but neglect others (abdominal muscles, upper body). Mix it up—try to find another aerobic activity that you also enjoy. Optimally, the routine will have at least 30 minutes of aerobic exercise five times a week, and two to three days of strength training, says Miriam Nelson, director of the John Hancock Center for Physical Activity and Nutrition at Tufts University. You can boost that by making two of the cardio sessions longer, she says. And don't neglect the stretching.

Don't forget the weights. Did we mention strength training already? Well, it's imperative. "Muscle is central to overall health," says Nelson. Ignoring its upkeep can affect cholesterol levels, immunity, bone density, and maybe even sleep and depression, she says. A recent study published in the online journal *PLoS ONE* suggests that healthy older adults can actually reverse skeletal muscle aging at the genetic level—meaning it's not just that the muscles look and act younger but are actually

genetically similar to much younger tissue—with a six-month resistance training program.

Start slowly. Ever notice how the gym is awfully crowded in January and pretty quiet by March? Those New Year's resolutionists who start out with great enthusiasm often overdo it and burn out or get injured within a few months. Instead, plan slower progress. Nelson likes to prescribe just 15 minutes of physical activity at the outset, three to four times a week, and build from there. And to keep your interest and focus, set goals that will take months, not weeks, to reach, says Scott.

Invest in good advice and good equipment. "I always encourage a good pair of shoes," says [Kathrine Switzer](#), the first woman to officially run the Boston Marathon and a lifelong advocate on behalf of women and exercise. "You can walk in running shoes, but you really shouldn't run in walking shoes. You don't have to spend \$100, but go to a running store where you'll get fitted correctly."

You may also want to pay for a session or two with an athletic trainer or physical therapist to make sure your form is good. "When you start a program, pay special attention to posture and balance," says Coyle. "When you start in your 50s and 60s, much of the challenge is keeping your body balanced and aligned."

Find an exercise buddy. You're much more likely to keep up a routine if you've got company. "Find a partner," says Switzer. "Make a date and keep it."

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