

OUT OF SHAPE AND MIDDLE-AGED? IT'S NOT TOO LATE TO TURN IT AROUND

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Why It Matters:

- Exercising during middle age can help restore youthfulness to your heart and may prevent heart failure.
- Getting physically active can lower your risk for multiple diseases and medical conditions.
- Tending to your health through exercise and other steps is an investment in your future well-being and financial picture.

It's not too late to get moving and improve your future health and financial picture.

Physical activity can boost your overall health by lowering your risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and even some cancers. Furthermore, embarking on the right exercise regimen in your 50s can reverse damage to a sedentary heart and can help prevent heart failure.

If you wait too long — well into your 60s — you may benefit from exercise, but research has found the reversal of heart damage won't happen.

Heart failure occurs when the heart cannot pump enough blood to keep up with the body's demand for blood and oxygen. "If that aging process goes unchecked, you're unlikely to change the structure of the heart and blood vessels," said sports cardiologist Benjamin Levine, M.D., director of the Institute of Exercise and Environmental Medicine, a collaboration of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center and Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital Dallas.

How much exercise is enough?

A study by Levine's team published in the American Heart Association's journal *Circulation* in January 2018 sought to find the "sweet spot" in middle age for restoring the elasticity of the heart through exercise. Study participants were in their early 50s on average.

Hart stiffness, a potential precursor to heart failure, decreased for those who engaged in two years of the right kind and right amount of exercise.

Think of the difference between an old, stiff rubber band that's been sitting in a junk drawer and a new rubber band pulled from a fresh pack, Levine said. The new one is more flexible.

"You stretch them and they snap back," he said. "That's true for the heart and blood vessels as well."

Participants who took part in a training program of high- and moderate-intensity exercise four to five times per week showed improvement in heart elasticity and in how their bodies used oxygen.

Levine said exercise each week should break down into these segments:

- One high-intensity workout, such as an aerobic interval workout that boosts the heart rate for four minutes at a time in several spurts during the session.
- An hour-long moderate-intensity workout doing something you find fun, such as tennis, biking, walking, or Zumba.
- Two or three more moderate workouts per week that might make you sweat, but still allow you to talk with someone.
- A strength training session.

Investing in your health

Getting physically active is one of [Life's Simple 7](#), seven measures and actions identified by the American Heart Association as having the most impact on heart health. The others are eating healthy, managing blood pressure, controlling cholesterol, reducing blood sugar, losing weight, and quitting smoking.

A Chicago-based study in 2017, using several Life's Simple 7 metrics, found middle-aged people with no major heart disease risk factors lived longer and experienced more years without chronic illnesses. They also had lower healthcare costs later in life.

While cost savings from maintaining good health in middle age are difficult to pinpoint because so many factors are involved, estimates are available for the individual and public costs of certain conditions and care.

For example, overall costs of cardiovascular disease in the United States were \$555 billion in 2016. By 2035 that number is expected to grow to \$1.1 trillion.

Getting and staying motivated

Prevention of heart disease and living a more healthful life can be exercise motivators in their own right. Unfortunately, many people "just get overwhelmed by life" by middle age, Levine said.

To make physical activity a priority, he advises making exercise a part of your daily routine, like getting dressed or brushing your teeth.

"Exercise needs to be part of your personal hygiene. It's not something that you just add on," he said.

Walking is an easy, inexpensive, and safe way to start an exercise plan in middle age. Cross-training, which avoids performing the same movements day in and day out, can help guard against repetitive stress injuries in joints, Levine said.

Consider organizing your personal life so you make time for exercise. Look to outside sources of support, including employee incentive programs that encourage workers to maintain good health like a discounted gym membership. Later in life, take advantage of Medicare's SilverSneakers program that provides free access to gyms and fitness classes.

The key is getting in the exercise habit, especially by late middle age.

"It's critical to your health," Levine said. "It can change the structure of your heart and blood vessels. That's a really powerful tool."

Things to Consider:

- Start an exercise plan that involves four or five sessions per week of varying intensity and activities.
- Look into incentives at work that encourage exercise and a healthy lifestyle.
- Keep track of your blood pressure, weight, and other health metrics so that you can keep them in the right range during middle age.