



Health Care Providers: Talk to Older Adults About Physical Activity

Getting physical activity is especially important for older adults. But it can be challenging to motivate patients in the short time you spend together.

The second edition of the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans includes evidence-based physical activity guidance for everyone, including older adults. Share the recommendations from the Guidelines with your patients and inspire them to get more active.

Start the conversation.

Try these quick conversation starters to bring up physical activity with your patients.

How much physical activity do you get in an average week?

Meet your patients where they are. Once you have an idea of their current activity level, you can suggest small changes to help them get more active. **Remind them that lots of things count as physical activity** — like walking the dog, working in the garden, or vacuuming.



Do you have any concerns about being active?

Your patients may worry about falling or getting hurt during physical activity. Some may not currently be active at all and might not know how to get started. **Encourage them to start slow** — with activities they're confident they can do. And consider referring patients to a physical therapist or exercise professional who can assess their mobility and create an individualized activity plan.



Are there activities you'd like to be able to do?

Do your patients want to complete everyday tasks more easily? Play with their grandkids without pain? Maintain their independence as they age? Knowing their motivations can help you work together to set achievable goals.



Recommend the right dose of activity.

You can tailor these recommendations to match your patients' specific needs, interests, and abilities.

Older adults need a mix of physical activity to stay healthy.

Moderate-intensity aerobic activity

Anything that gets their heart beating faster counts.



Muscle-strengthening activity

Activities that make their muscles work harder than usual count.



As part of their weekly activity, older adults need multicomponent physical activity, which includes aerobic, muscle-strengthening, and balance activities.

Multicomponent activity — like dancing, water aerobics, or tai chi — helps keep older adults' bodies strong and lowers their risk of falling.

Remind patients that they can break up their 150 minutes a week however they want. It's also okay to start with 5 or 10 minutes of physical activity at a time and build up to more.

Some patients with chronic health conditions may not be able to do 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity a week. **Encourage them to be as physically active as they can — any amount of activity is better than none.**

Make it a prescription.

Try framing the recommended dose of physical activity as a prescription — your patients may take it more seriously. Learn more at:

[exerciseismedicine.org/hcp](https://www.exerciseismedicine.org/hcp)



Focus on the benefits.

Share these messages about specific benefits of physical activity with your patients.

Remind patients that physical activity can make daily life better.



Improves mood, focus, and sleep



Makes it easier to do everyday tasks, like cleaning and grocery shopping



Helps patients manage chronic pain and other health problems



Lowers their risk of falls — and their risk of an injury if they do fall



Helps them stay independent as they get older

Emphasize that getting active can help them connect socially.

Social isolation is a big problem for many older adults, but getting active with others can help. Point patients to community programs for older adults, like SilverSneakers® — some of which are covered by Medicare. Or encourage them to invite a neighbor, friend, or family member to go on a walk.

Be ready to address barriers.

Changing behavior is hard. And fitting in regular physical activity can be a struggle for all of us. Find out what's holding your patients back and talk about possible solutions. These strategies can help your patients find ways to overcome common barriers.



“I have an illness, disability, or injury.”

Being active can actually help manage symptoms from many chronic conditions — like diabetes, depression, and arthritis. And it's possible to adapt many physical activities for people with disabilities and health conditions. The National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD) has helpful guidance: nchpad.org/Articles/7/Disability~Condition

“Pain makes it hard to be active.”

Physical activity can ease pain and help people feel better. If your patients are recovering from an injury, remind them to listen to their body and do what feels right for them. Suggest that they explore activities that don't put too much stress on joints and may minimize discomfort — like walking, water aerobics, or tai chi.



“I'm too tired to exercise.”

It may sound counterintuitive to your patients, but getting more physical activity can actually boost energy and help them feel less tired. Encourage manageable changes to daily routines and help them set goals to add more activity over time.

“I don’t have anywhere to go when the weather is bad.”

Unsafe or undesirable weather conditions can make getting active outside a challenge. Suggest ways to get active at home or places to walk indoors, like at a mall or big box store. Virtual classes are another great way to get active indoors — and can also address other barriers, like a lack of transportation.



“I want to build my strength, but I’m not sure how.”

Encourage patients to ask their local gym or community rec center if it offers demonstrations of muscle-strengthening equipment — or suggest free online videos that show how to do specific exercises.

Share these resources with your patients...

The Move Your Way website [health.gov/MoveYourWay] has information about physical activity and tips for getting active and staying motivated. It also features:

- An interactive tool for building a printable, personalized physical activity plan to help patients plan and track their weekly goals: health.gov/MoveYourWay/Activity-Planner
- Personal stories about how to combine physical activity and healthy eating to get even more health benefits: health.gov/MoveYourWay/Stories/John-Patty



The National Institute on Aging (NIA) offers workout videos tailored to older adults: go.nia.nih.gov/exercise

... and print materials to use in your office.

The Move Your Way campaign has fact sheets and posters for you to display — so patients get the message about physical activity every time they visit: health.gov/MoveYourWay/MaterialsForOlderAdults

Want to learn more about what works to get older adults moving? Check out the **Physical Activity Guidelines Midcourse Report: Implementation Strategies for Older Adults:** health.gov/our-work/nutrition-physical-activity/physical-activity-guidelines/current-guidelines/midcourse-report



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