

Keep Moving!

How to Stay Fit As You Age

BY WINNIE YU

FOR YEARS, PATTI KUNDEL had been an avid runner and a frequent visitor to the gym, where she did a combination of aerobics and strength training. But over time, as life got busy, Kundel scaled back and did just cardio workouts, usually a 30-minute run.



The routine worked for a while, but when Kundel hit her 40s things began to change. She started gaining weight, and after running she noticed a nagging pain in her hips and shoulders. Recovering from the pain took a week instead of a day, and her doctor eventually confirmed it was arthritis.

Her ob-gyn recommended more weight training, but Kundel resisted. “Like most women, I was hesitant to increase strength at the risk of becoming bulky,” says Kundel, 48, of Voorheesville, NY, and the mother of four boys. “It took convincing that jumping and pounding for an hour wasn’t good exercise.”

What finally convinced her was a “boot camp” class at a nearby YMCA. The one-hour class, which she takes three times a week, combines strength exercises like planks, sit-ups and lunges, with cardio movements like sprinting and jumping. “I have seen a dramatic change in my overall body shape, losing lots of inches while also losing real pounds,” says Kundel, an executive vice president for a medical liability insurance firm. “I have increased my endurance and

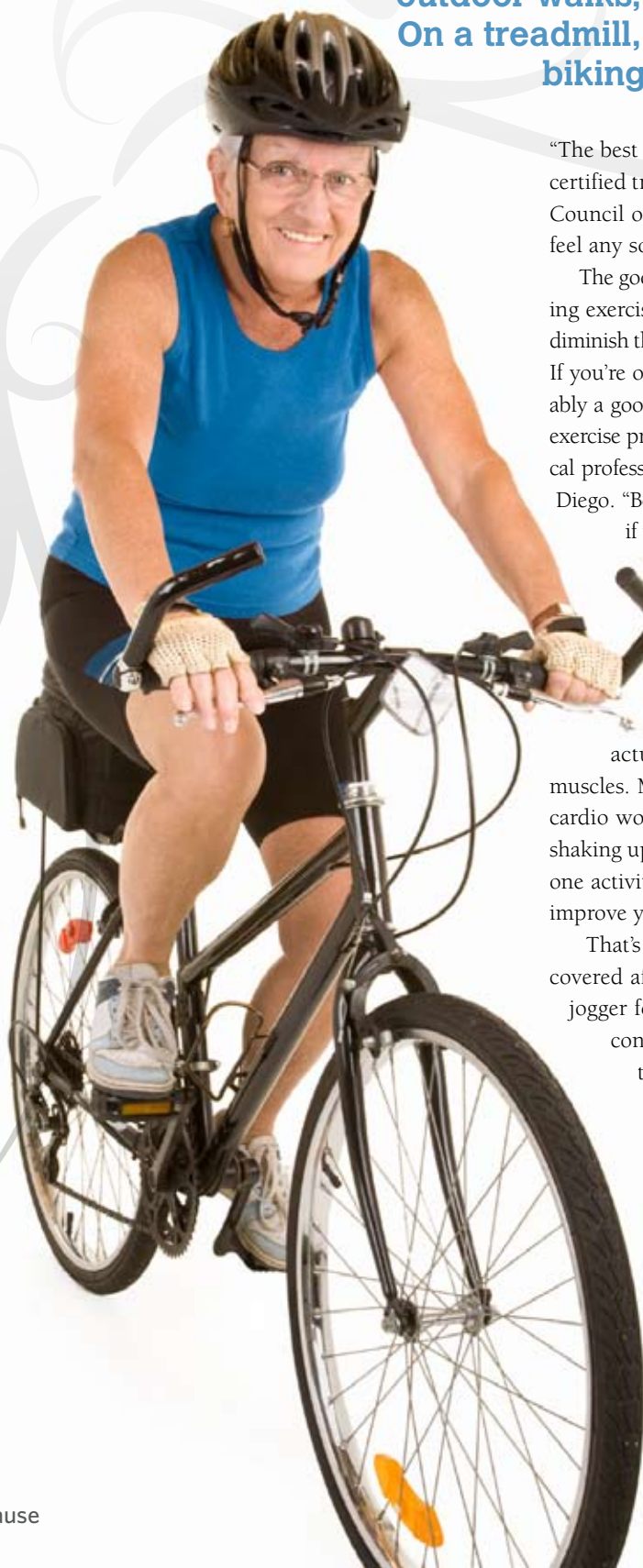
strength, and even improved my posture. Best of all, I have taken almost a full minute off my mile, which has been the same for years.”

Let’s face it: Every active woman wants to stay agile, limber, and strong as she gets older. But eventually, infirmities start creeping into our workouts. That awesome backhand now causes shoulder pain. Long bike rides result in a sore back. And once-easy hikes now leave us winded and achy. “Over time, pretty much everything goes in the opposite direction you want it to,” says Barbara Bushman, PhD, a professor of health, physical education, and recreation at Missouri State University in Springfield.

Most people notice changes in their late 30s or early 40s. Lungs become less elastic, making endurance a challenge. Muscles shrink and lose elasticity as well, reducing strength and flexibility. Joints may start feeling the early ravages of arthritis such as stiffness and pain. Some people suffer a new injury that may force changes sooner than later, or an old injury resuscitates itself with renewed symptoms.



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“The best cue is to listen to your body,” says Josie Gardiner, a certified trainer in Boston and spokesperson for the American Council on Exercise. “It’s the one voice you can trust. If you feel any sort of pain, back off.”

The good news is by modifying your workouts and introducing exercises that you may have ignored in the past, you can diminish the impact of these changes and preserve your prowess. If you’re over 50 and you haven’t moved for a while, it’s probably a good idea to let your doctor know before starting a new exercise program, recommends Cynthia A. Stuenkel, MD, clinical professor of medicine at the University of California in San Diego. “Be aware of signs and symptoms of heart disease, and if you experience any suspicious symptoms while stepping up your routine, give yourself the benefit of the doubt and get checked out,” Stuenkel advises. (See *Numbers to Know by Heart*, page 8.)

Mix It Up

Introducing new exercises into your routine can actually improve your fitness level by working new muscles. Many women make the mistake of focusing just on cardio workouts, which tend to burn the most calories. But shaking up your routine with something different or swapping one activity for another can keep your workouts interesting, improve your overall condition, and help prevent injuries.

That’s what Jill Weisenberger, 47, of Yorktown, VA, discovered after she was hurt on a trampoline last fall. An avid jogger for 20 years, Weisenberger, a writer and nutritional consultant, began working out on an elliptical and stationary bike instead. She also devotes more time to stretching and strength training than she did before. “My goal is to make jogging my main activity again, but I’ll be doing the elliptical and walking, too,” she says.

With age, all forms of exercise become equally important if you want to stay active. “While you could get away with doing just one form of exercise in the past, it’s really important at midlife to incorporate all the components of fitness into your program, not just cardio for your heart and lungs,” Gardiner says. “Try to include a mix of strength, cardio, core, flex-



CHOOSING A GYM

A good fitness center can make all the difference when it comes to staying fit. Here's what you should look for in a gym, says Jim Massaro, a strength and conditioning coach and owner of Advanced Body Personal & Athletic Training Center, in Nyack, NY:

- **LOOK FOR FACILITIES** no more than 10 minutes from your home or office. Most people aren't likely to travel much farther than that to work out.
- **CHECK OUT THE OFFERINGS.** Make sure the gym has a mix of cardio equipment, free weights, and adjustable weight machines. If it's classes you want, ask for a schedule and find out whether extra fees are involved.
- **SCOPE IT OUT** for cleanliness. Look around the gym, locker room, and shower and see if they're well-maintained and clean.
- **DROP IN** at the time of day when you're most likely to go. By doing that, you'll see who will be working out beside you and how busy it is.
- **ASK IF SOMEONE WILL WALK YOU** through the machines when you first join. And find out if someone is available to help if you forget how to use a machine or want to learn a new one.

ibility, and balance training. This will allow you to be able to do all the activities you love and maintain a high quality of life injury free.”

Strength training is especially helpful for women in midlife. Not only does it help maintain bone density and build muscle mass—which helps sustain metabolism and prevent weight gain—but it also helps with movements both big and small. About 40 percent of the body consists of muscles for movement, work, and play, which allow you to lift, reach, move, push, and pull with ease.

When you do strength training, make sure to work all of the muscle groups, Gardiner says, including the legs, chest, hips, stomach, shoulders, and arms. Of special importance, she says, are the legs

and gluteal muscles of the butt. “The legs and glutes are the ones that get you in and out of a chair,” she says. Keeping the legs strong will also maintain balance, she adds. Balance helps avoid falls and the fractures that can result.

Flexibility and balance exercises are essential for preventing stiffness and injuries, including falls. Good flexibility exercises include yoga, tai chi, or simple stretching. For balance, you might want to work out on a Bosu balance trainer, a dome-shaped gadget designed specifically for balance training. You might also sit on a stability ball, or practice standing on one leg for a minute.

If doing so many types of exercise seems too daunting, break it up over a week. Bushman recom-

WANT A TRAINER?

If you're new to strength training or any other kind of exercise, you might consider hiring a personal trainer, says Josie Gardiner, a trainer and spokesperson with the American Council on Exercise (ACE). Having a trainer ensures you are moving at the right pace for your fitness level and also doing the exercises in proper form. According to ACE, here's what you should look for:

- **FIND SOMEONE WHO IS CERTIFIED** by an agency in the National Commission for Certifying Agencies, the umbrella organization that oversees certification for numerous professional agencies, including ACE and the American College of Sports Medicine.
- **ASK ABOUT EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE.** Find out whether a trainer has a degree in exercise science or a related field and how many years of experience he or she has. If you have certain needs, ask for a referral to a trainer who is specialized in this area.
- **GET REFERENCES.** Ask others what they think of their trainer and how he or she works.
- **HAVE A CONVERSATION.** A good rapport with your trainer can make a big difference in how well you do.
- **TALK MONEY.** If it's too expensive, ask if the trainer would consider working with small groups or on a less frequent schedule.
- **GO WITH A TRAINER** you like and whose schedule suits yours. Working with someone whose company you enjoy will help ensure success.

mends committing three days to cardio exercise and two days to strength training, then doing stretches in the evening two to three times a week. "Balance exercises can be done anytime," Bushman says.

Make the Most of Your Workout

Even with all the variety, you might find it harder to exercise. Blame it on waning endurance caused by changes in the heart and lungs. "The decrease in elasticity in lungs forces you to work harder to breathe, which can contribute to earlier fatigue and limitations in levels of activity," Bushman says. "There's also a decrease in the amount of oxygen that your body can take in and use. On top of that, your heart rate decreases, so that your aerobic capacity drops. All these changes will decrease your fitness level and lower your intensity level."

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increasing the intensity of your workouts by adding distance or speed. On outdoor walks, go for routes with more hills. On a treadmill, boost the incline. If you prefer biking, add more resistance.

Another strategy is to do more interval training so that you're changing the amount of effort every few minutes. "Interval training is a great way to improve endurance by alternating between intervals of work and rest," Gardiner says. For example, you might run on a treadmill for three minutes, then walk at a slower pace for three minutes, and alternate between these two intervals. Or you could switch back and forth between walking 3.6 mph for three minutes and 4.0 mph for three minutes. "This allows you to gradually get stronger," she adds.

Whatever you do, start your workouts with a warm-up. "As you age, it takes longer to warm up and cool down," Gardiner says. "A warm-up gets the blood flowing and

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increases body temperature, which prepares the joints, connective tissue, and muscles for the activity and prevents injuries.” A good warm-up should last eight to 15 minutes, though this will vary depending on the activity.

Follow the warm-up with some gentle stretching exercises, says Mark Pinto, MD, a spokesperson for the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons and an orthopedic surgeon at Chelsea Community Hospital in MI. “The more elastic the tissues, the better they are able to perform activities with less chance of injury,” he says.

Coping with Arthritis

Unfortunately, many routines can be thrown off by arthritis, a chronic condition that occurs when the joint’s cartilage breaks down. Cartilage is the cushion at the ends of the bones that allow your joints to move. Without it, bones rub against each other, causing the pain and stiffness we know as arthritis. Usually, arthritis symptoms are due to garden variety osteoarthritis, but in some instances, arthritis can be a sign of more serious autoimmune or medical disorders. (See *Oh, Those Aching Bones*, page 13.) Be certain to report joint symptoms or swelling to your doctor for confirmation of the diagnosis.

The thought of exercising when you have arthritis pain may seem daunting, but activity is still essential. “It seems counterintuitive to exercise when you have joint pain or arthritis,” says Jason Theodosakis, MD, author of *The Arthritis Cure* and an assistant clinical professor at the University of Arizona in Tucson. “In fact exercise is absolutely critical to halt progression of the disease and to help treat symptoms. The key is doing exercises that don’t flare up the condition but strengthen the surrounding structures of the joint.” Arthritis in the hips, knees, and ankles, for instance, benefits from low-impact lower-body workouts such as walking, biking, and swimming. If you have questions about how exercise can affect your arthritis, check with your doctor.

To tame mild arthritis pain, consider taking fish oil or glucosamine and chondroitin supplements, says

Lynn Millar, PT, PhD, a professor of physical therapy at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, MI. Although consistent benefit has not been proven in medical studies, some people have reported pain relief from these supplements. Applying a capsaicin ointment before exercising can also help. Be sure to let your doctor know about any dietary supplements you are taking.

According to Millar, stretching is especially important for people with arthritis who want to exercise. “You should do simple stretches, but don’t go outside the regular range of motion,” she says.

To get through a workout that is particularly strenuous, consider taking a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory (such as ibuprofen) beforehand to limit swelling and discomfort. Wearing an ACE bandage can help keep the joint warm and prevent swelling. If the pain gets worse, talk to your doctor or physical therapist. You might need an orthotic to correct poor joint alignment or a brace to protect an unstable joint, both of which aggravate arthritis pain.

In some cases, it may be necessary to scale back or change what you are doing. But whatever you do, keep moving. “Good muscle tone and development act as a shock absorber,” Theodosakis says. “If you do too little, the muscles surrounding the joint will atrophy, and you will place more force on the joint with normal activity. There’s a window between too little or too much that each individual must learn.”

The Bottom Line

Whether it’s walking, swimming, or tennis, experts agree: The key to staying active is to keep moving. “Exercise has been shown to slow the decrease and possibly reverse the processes associated with age,” Pinto says. “A balanced fitness program can keep soft tissues flexible around joints, maintain or increase bone mass, improve muscle mass, and improve cardiovascular health.” If it’s been years since you exercised, talk to your doctor about devising a plan. Then start slowly. “It’s never too late to start,” Bushman says. 