Work out now to prevent chronic issues later

Exercising in your 50s can prevent myriad chronic issues later in life, from dementia to bone loss to yes, even cancer.



Physical activity can favorably influence physiological changes in your body and your mental and social health, says Mary Edwards, fitness director of the Cooper Fitness Center.(Getty Images)

Embracing an active life in your 50s and beyond is just what the doctor ordered to help you live longer — and age well.

“Physical activity is the only lifestyle behavior that has been identified to

date that can favorably influence physiological changes in your body and your mental and social health," says Mary Edwards, fitness director of the Cooper Fitness Center.

Research continues to mount on the preventative power of regular exercise to pack a one-two, heart-healthy, antiaging punch to help prevent chronic disease, support muscle and bone loss, and boost our mood.

Experts recommend a minimum of 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity spread throughout the week, and strength training for all muscle groups at least twice a week.

There's a lot to love about the guidelines for people worried about memory loss and dementia. Studies show that 30 minutes of moderate exercise five days a week can help reduce the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease as we get older, says Dr. Diana Kerwin, founder of Kerwin Medical Center at Texas Health Dallas and a geriatric medicine specialist in brain function and brain health.

"Data has shown that even a good 30-minute walk every day has brain health benefits almost immediately," says Kerwin. "It doesn't have to be a marathon or an intensive workout, and it doesn't have to be 30 minutes at once; it could be in 10- or 15-minute increments. It's just increasing those steps every day."

Choosing to move with leisure activities that you enjoy may also be one of the secrets to living longer.

Older adults who participate in weekly activities such as tennis, swimming, golf, cycling or walking may have a lower risk of death from cardiovascular disease, cancer or any cause, according to a study in the JAMA Network Open Journal.

The authors, who are researchers at the National Cancer Institute, analyzed data from 272,550 adults between the ages of 59 and 82, and suggest it is important to choose recreation you enjoy and can sustain because “many types of these activities may lower the risk of death.”

Paul Armour, 67, stays strong and agile with competitive slalom, tricks and water-ski jumping.(Courtesy of Paul Armour)

Paul Armour's commitment to staying strong and agile has helped him keep up a decades-long passion for competitive slalom, tricks and water-ski jumping, or what he calls "his golf." Just back from the Water Ski National Championships, the 67-year-old captured gold in the jumping category and earned a second-place overall nod in his 65-plus age category.

Armour, who can often be found at Cooper Aerobics taking a spin class, tackling movement exercises on the fitness floor, and lifting weights for flexibility and core strength, feels as fit as he did 15 years ago. But he admits he has adjusted his routine to focus more on flexibility

"Stretching," Armour says. "It's the first thing to leave. I stiffen up. So now, if I'm going out to train, I'll spend a half-hour going through a stretching regimen [first]. It gets things moving, which helps me avoid injury."

Developing a workout plan

When it comes to moderate physical activity, look for anything that raises your breathing and heart rate but allows you to still talk without gasping for air. Don't be intimidated by the magic number of 150 minutes or more. You'd be surprised at how fast you can hit that, especially when simple things like a brisk walk, dancing, doubles tennis and mowing the lawn all count.

For strength training, aim to target all the major muscle groups twice a week

using free weights, weight machines, resistance bands or your own body with exercises such as lunges and wall push-ups. And don't forget to include range-of-motion and stretching exercises for flexibility and strength.

You may need to shift the way you divide time between cardiovascular fitness and weight training as you age to support your balance and daily living needs. Edwards points to the following advice from Cooper Aerobics founder Dr. Kenneth H. Cooper on aerobic strength training ratios by life stage:

- Ages 40 and younger: 80% aerobic exercise, 20% strength training
- Ages 41-50: 70% aerobic exercise, 30% strength training
- Ages 51-60: 60% aerobic exercise, 40% strength training
- Ages 61+: 55% aerobic exercise, 45% strength training

"At the end of the day, the goal is to move," Edwards says. "If we just have people walking 30 minutes, most days per week, that can shift them out of the poor category into the fair category of fitness and be life-changing."

For his part, Armour, who calls himself "80% retired," has no plans to slow down anytime soon. Along with being a world-class water skier, he's an avid mountain biker and hatching plans to stripe a pickleball court on the drive of his Collin County Princeton home to enjoy the popular sport with his wife.

Exercise, he says, doesn't have to be structured to get results.

"I see a lot of people walking every morning, and if that's what you like to do, do it," says Armour. "Just mix it up. You can do anything you want to if you put your mind to it."