

## Investing in health in middle age pays dividends in older age

By Professor Anne Tiedemann and Ms Geraldine Wallbank

Institute for Musculoskeletal Health, The University of Sydney and Sydney Local Health District

[@AnneTiedemann1](#) [@GeraldineWallb1](#)

‘Old age is like everything else. To make a success of it, you’ve got to start young.’ This famous quote by US President Theodore Roosevelt was probably not referring specifically to one’s health, however, the application to health is perfect. The healthy, older adult is a product of prior years spent wisely.

We all agree that ‘prevention is better than cure’ and ‘exercise is good for you’. But does knowledge necessarily translate into action? ABS data (2021) show an alarming 75% of Australian adults are insufficiently physically active, i.e. not achieving guideline-recommended levels of activity. For middle-aged adults, this rises to 80%[1]. Globally, there are 5.4 million deaths associated with insufficient activity[2], with an annual health system cost of INT\$67.5 billion[3].

Ultimately, insufficient physical inactivity costs the individual because they fail to reap the immediate and long-term health benefits offered by physical activity. To be independent in older age, one needs to adopt healthy habits before reaching older age. The middle-age years are a critical time to invest in your future self.

Many people would like to be more active. Three key points could prompt action.

Firstly, your body responds positively! Regular physical activity of any intensity reduces the risk of all-cause mortality if commenced in the middle-age years irrespective of previous physical activity[4, 5]. This is good news for people who were not physically active in their younger years or who are not currently active. It’s not too late to start.

Secondly, your preferences matter! Enjoyment is key. Some people may like the creativity of dancing, others may like the rhythm of cycling, others may like the balance and challenge of yoga. It’s up to you! You could try something new. There is no universal type of physical activity that one must do to receive benefits. Regular participation is the key[6].

Thirdly, physical activity is for everyone! No matter your personality or time constraints, physical activity is for you. Do you like spending time with people? Physical activity is an opportunity to catch up with friends, or meet new people who have a shared interest in your physical activity. Do you need time to yourself? Physical activity is a way to unwind and feel recharged for life. Do you only have a snippet of time? You could be physically active for short bursts throughout the day as the benefits are cumulative[6].

Starting something new requires planning. This may involve consulting a general practitioner if there are pre-existing health conditions, deciding on which physical activity to do, and the location or equipment needed. Then,

1. Start small. You might start off at a low intensity for 5-10 minutes, then build up over time.
2. Schedule your physical activity. Time often gets hijacked by competing priorities, so protect your physical activity time in your calendar.
3. Satisfaction. Celebrate your efforts! You could chart your physical activity, use an activity tracker, or tell someone about your achievement!

Everyone can be successful. Your future self will thank your younger self for this investment.

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