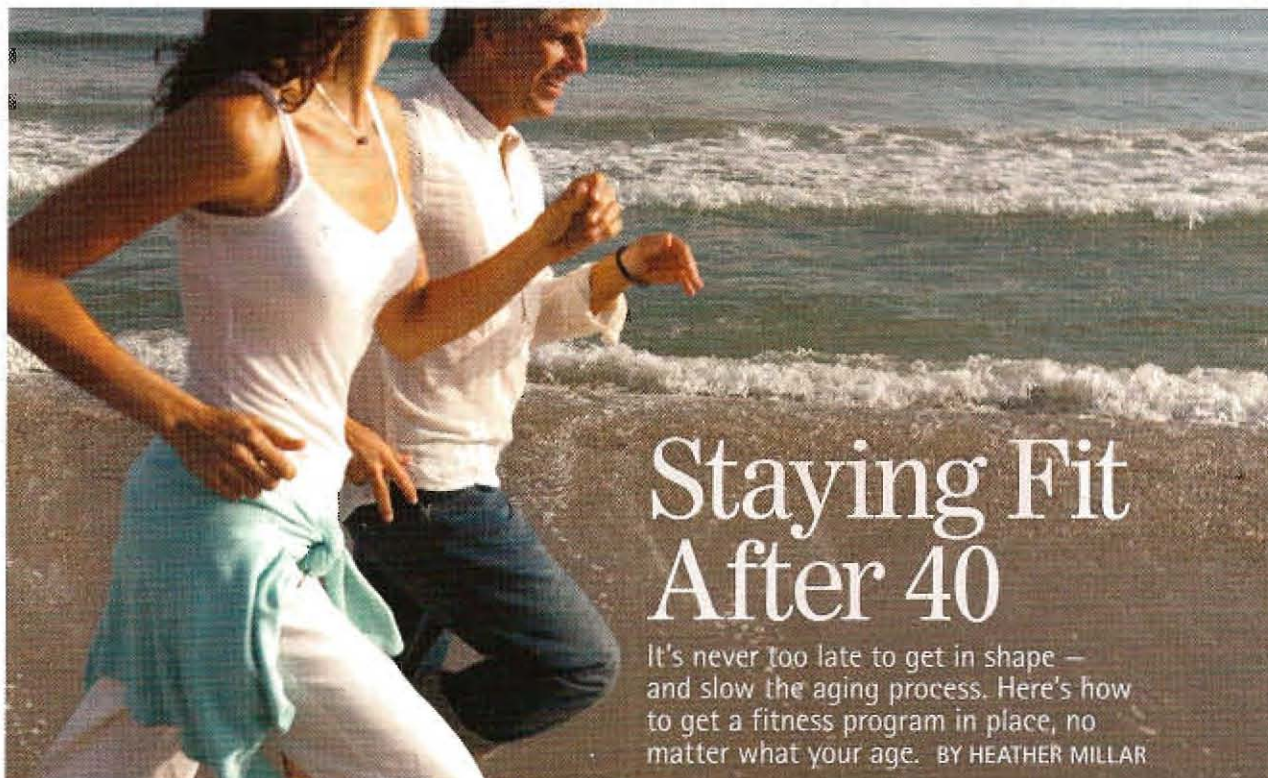


HEALTH



Staying Fit After 40

It's never too late to get in shape — and slow the aging process. Here's how to get a fitness program in place, no matter what your age. BY HEATHER MILLAR

My father-in-law, Barney, will be 90 this summer. He still cycles 10 miles a day. He occasionally goes skiing and in-line skating. He goes polka dancing every Wednesday and gets up at five every morning to do calisthenics.

You've heard all Barney's advice before: Eat right. Don't smoke. Don't drink too much. Get enough sleep. Exercise regularly. You know that if he — and the doctors and personal trainers — had their way, you'd be doing sit-ups from nursery to nursing home.

Of course, life doesn't work that way. Business trips, school plays, aging parents, demanding bosses, maintaining a marriage — the stuff of life gets in the way. But if we can't be perfect through every decade, the experts advise that we should at least get with the program by middle age.

New studies increasingly show that our odds of remaining healthy and independent in our 70s, 80s, and even 90s are greatly improved if we stayed in shape in our 40s, 50s, and 60s. People who keep moving, who stay flexible, who work on their balance, are much more likely to stay independent. They're much less likely to suffer diabetes, heart attacks, and osteoporosis.

They're also less likely to fall and suffer crippling injuries, say doctors, physical therapists, and fitness trainers. Just look at Barney.

Research is beginning to show that it's not that our bodies slow down as we age. Rather, as we age, we stop moving and *then* our bodies slow down. "It's a self-fulfilling prophecy: If you think you're going to get old and fat, you're going to get old and fat," says Chuck Barnard, national fitness director for Midtown Athletic Clubs based in Chicago, Illinois.

"The data are stronger and stronger: Changes once thought an inevitable part of aging do not have to occur. The key is that you have to keep moving," explains Dr. Marilyn Moffat, author of *Age Defying Fitness* and professor of physical therapy at New York University. "In terms of cardio, of bone mass, of muscle strength, of flexibility, it's a use-it-or-lose-it body."

It's never too late to start. Recent studies show that sedentary elderly people can make the same gains in strength and cardio function as sedentary young people. My father-in-law didn't get into cycling until he was in his 60s, and now I think he's more fit than anyone else in the family.

So here is what the experts say about keeping fit through middle age and beyond. ➤

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If you've been inactive, make sure to get evaluated by a doctor or physical therapist before you start exercising. Chronological age can be different from physiological age. "A lot of 40-year-olds are in better shape than a lot of 20-year-olds," says Dr. Alexis Chiang Colvin, an assistant professor of sports medicine in the department of orthopedic surgery at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York City.

people, your chance to take advantage of your relative youth to build up your heart muscle and your lean muscle, get your core muscles in shape, and rid yourself of excess fat, especially belly fat," says Dr. Michael Ozner, medical director for the Center for Prevention and Wellness at Baptist Health South Florida and author of several books, including *The Great American Heart Hoax*:

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Start slow, just a couple days a week, and increase that gradually. Work out with a friend. If you set goals you can meet, or you make it a social event, you'll be more likely to make fitness a habit. Here are decade-by-decade tips for staying in shape.

Fitness in your 40s

Both men and women are starting to lose bone mass and muscle mass as they enter their 40s. Women tend to lose more bone, and men lose more muscle. These will continue to decrease for the rest of your life, but you can still build up both in this decade, increasing your starting point.

"This is a high-energy decade for most

Lifesaving Advice Your Doctor Should Tell You About Heart Disease Prevention (But Probably Never Will).

Strength training will build up both bone and muscle: push-ups, crunches, leaning against a wall in a sitting position, dumbbells, barbells. Check out a Pilates or power yoga class if you have time.

Do as much vigorous aerobic exercise as you can: running, swimming, speed walking. Work out up to five days a week if you can.

As much as it's important to get in shape in this decade, experts emphasize that you shouldn't overdo it — a lot of athletes in this age range get into trouble by pushing themselves too hard. ➤

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Fitness in your 50s

This is a time to keep on keepin' on, but it's also a time when changing hormones — for both men and women — can wreak havoc on diet and exercise plans. The most important thing, doctors say, is to get your heart working hard at least once a day to get oxygen flowing throughout your body. That means panting and sweating.

This is also the beginning of the aches-and-pains decade. So take care of your joints and your spine. Ease into lower-impact activities such as pedaling a recumbent bike, power walking, or golf (just don't use a cart). Do upper and lower back exercises to stave off pains. Be aware of your posture to avoid a curved-over, elderly look.

Strength training is still important, but now the goal is to build lean, rather than big muscles. Use lighter weights, but do more repetitions.

Fitness in your 60s and up

"Age shouldn't be a reason for not exercising as you get older," says Dr. Chiang Colvin of Mount Sinai. "You just have to do it smarter."

Make sure to drink enough water: Our thirst mechanism weakens as we age. Focus on going steady. It's probably best to avoid really strenuous sports like rowing. Walk 15 to 30 minutes a day if your knees can handle it.

"At this stage, you want to hold on to what

you've got," says Dr. David Prince, director of the cardiac recovery program at Montefiore Heart Center in the Bronx, New York. "If some activity — like getting out of a car or climbing stairs — starts to get difficult, start doing exercises to make it easier. It will only get harder if you avoid it."

It's also OK to put more emphasis on activity than sports. Google "activity calorie calculator" and commit to doing at least one thing each day that burns 150 calories, whether it's raking leaves or walking the dog.

Seek out low-impact activities such as yoga, Pilates, tai chi, water aerobics, and dancing.

"At this age, fitness should be less about competition and more about having fun and doing a little bit every day," says Fiona Gathright, president of Wellness Corporate Solutions in Cabin John, Maryland, a firm that advises companies on encouraging employee fitness.

Don't forget to work on your sense of balance. If you're up to ice skating or in-line skating, great, but something as simple as standing on one foot while you brush your teeth can strengthen your balance and help prevent falls.

And listen to your body: If you're sore, take a day's rest to recover. Your body may take a little more time to bounce back now, but if you keep it active, you should be able to enjoy good health into your 70s and beyond. ■

