

Jumping Back on the Exercise Bandwagon Later in Life

Dr. Kevin Walsh sees it all too frequently – people in their 40s or 50s who decide to “get back in shape” but promptly end up injured because they didn’t exercise properly or took things too fast.

Walsh, a non-operative sports medicine physician at Bryn Mawr Hospital, says that the most common exercise injuries among aging adults are muscle strains and tendonitis. With proper precautions, however, exercise can be injury free.

“The first thing I advise people to do before beginning an exercise program is to see their doctor,” says Walsh. “This is especially important for people who are over 50, have any kind of medical condition or are taking medications. A doctor can check your physical condition and help you decide what exercise best suits you.”

Walsh also recommends that people start slowly if they haven’t exercised in awhile, gradually increasing workouts until they reach 30 to 40 minutes three or four times a week.

“There’s no rush,” he says. “Begin with a short walk, then increase to a mile and decrease the time it takes to walk that mile. The goal is to gradually increase the difficulty of what you do so that you get a good aerobic workout.”

According to Walsh, aerobic workouts are those that cause the heart to beat faster and breath to come more rapidly. Sometimes referred to as “cardio,” this type of exercise is important because it burns calories, strengthens the heart and lungs and can be effective in lowering cholesterol, taking weight off, and reducing blood pressure.

“Many of the health problems people have later in life can be improved or sometimes even eliminated by exercise,” he says. “I’ve had patients who have been able to stop taking blood pressure medications and even eliminate their diabetes thanks in part to exercise.”

Aging adults who are just beginning an exercise program should also work on improving their flexibility, advises Walsh.

“Flexibility decreases as we age so it’s important to warm up and cool down with five to 15 minutes of stretching,” he says. “This will improve flexibility and help protect against injury and muscle strain. Try a variety of stretches for different parts of the body, including arms, shoulders, back, chest, thighs, and calves.”

Walsh offers two final pieces of advice.

“Find activities or exercises you enjoy doing and vary your routine,” he says. “If you hate running, try biking or swimming. Join a class or find an exercise partner. People often quit exercising because they don’t enjoy what they’re doing or they get bored. With all of the exercise options out there today there is no reason that should happen.”

Bottom line, says Walsh, exercise is important and should be a part of everyone’s life, no matter their age.

“There is growing evidence that many of the physical and mental declines common with aging can be reduced with appropriate fitness and nutrition programs,” he says. “Remember, it’s never too late to start improving fitness.”