You want to start exercising again, but it’s been years — perhaps decades — since you were physically active.

Perhaps you’re 55 years old, you’ve got a bad hip, and you’re worried about falling down.

You may just think it’s too late to start up again.

You’re not alone. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 28 percent of adults 50 years and older — roughly 31 million — are physically inactive.

A sedentary lifestyle as an older adult, however, often leads to chronic diseases and conditions, many of which can be prevented or managed with physical activity. In fact, inactivity in adults 50 and older is 30 percent higher in those with a chronic disease, the CDC reports.

This illustrates why Heather Haslem, coordinator of academics and education at the University of Nevada, Reno’s Sanford Center for Aging, says it’s never too late to return to physical activity or exercising.

“You can start at any time and people see benefits to engaging in physical activity at any time,” Haslem said.

For starters, Haslem said, physical activity enables active adults to retain their independence.

“It helps to really do all the different activities of daily living, such as getting dressed, going to the restroom ... and it can also help with basic activities like grocery shopping and playing with grandchildren and loved ones,” Haslem said in a phone interview with Peak NV. “Doing the things that people want to do to maintain their lives.”

Dr. Peter Reed, director of the Sanford Center for Aging, said there are many health conditions that can develop during the aging process — such as arthritis, osteoporosis and diabetes — that are exacerbated when people don’t have a strong strength and conditioning regimen.

The CDC reports that four in five of the most financially costly chronic conditions among adults 50 years or older can be prevented or managed by physical activity.

“You can maintain your bone strength and muscle strength,” Reed explained. “By staying engaged in physical activity, it reduces the impact of those chronic conditions.”

BABY STEPS

Whether it’s because of illness, ongoing health issues, or the risk of injuries, starting or maintaining an active lifestyle as you age can have its physical and mental hurdles.

Some older adults, especially those who’ve never exercised before, simply might not know where to begin. If that’s the case, Haslem recommends dipping in your toes rather than jumping in with both feet.

“Maybe starting out with a five- to 10-minute walk per week, and then starting to increase the duration of the time and intensity at which you’re walking,” she said.

To help keep the pace of being active, Dr. Reed said it’s important to choose physical activities that you actually enjoy. In other words, dread an exercise routine will make it that much harder to keep up.

“If someone likes going for walks around their neighborhood, then that’s something that we would encourage them to do,” he said. “If someone hates running on a treadmill, then we would not encourage them to do that. Really, personal preference plays a role in whether or not people are going to be able to maintain the activity over time.”

To that end, exercise doesn’t necessarily have to be done in a gym or on a walking path, Haslem said.

“Some people would prefer to work out in the gym, some would prefer to be in the garden,” Haslem said. “I sometimes just call it ‘movement’ instead, because I think physical activity sometimes has a similar connotation as exercise for people at this point.

“So it’s more, how do you move your body? How do you enjoy moving your body?”

STAYING UP

Some older adults may be hesitant to move their body at all because they’re worried they might fall. This is not an insignificant fear, said Dr. Reed, pointing out that one-third of people over 65 years old fall each year, according to the CDC.

This presents a catch-22 situation for many older adults.

“The fear of falling may prevent some people from being willing to engage in physical activity,” Reed said. “But by not engaging in physical activity, they increase their risk of falls because they’re not maintaining their muscle and bone strength and balance and gait in ways that are positive.

“Do something is better than nothing, and people need to be comfortable with what they’re doing.”
Let’s get moving

No matter your age, make regular physical activity a habit.

Haslem said at the Sanford Center for Aging’s Fit and Strong class, it’s common for older adults to start the class with a fear of falling.

However, “by the end, you can see significant benefits just be engaging in regular physical activity,” she said.

For disabled adults who are chair-bound and struggle to get fitness while sitting down, Haslem recommends using resistance bands and hand weights.

“There’s a lot of different exercises that someone can do to build arm strength with a resistance band,” she said. “Or even using hand weights.”

SOCIAL AND MENTAL BOOSTS

Aside from the physical benefits, Haslem and Reed stressed the mental benefits of regularly engaging in movement as you age.

Mood. Memory. Sleep. Self-confidence. Exercise and activity enhances all of these things. And the more people they interact with in the process, the better.

“A lot of elders participate in group exercise activities, which increases their social connectedness,” Reed said.

“Because isolation and loneliness are two challenges that elders face in the community. And so to give them opportunities to get together with other people — particularly if it’s a physical activity — then that addresses their physical, mental and social health and wellbeing.”

— Kaleb M. Roedel is a special assignments reporter for the Sierra Nevada Media Group, which publishes Peak NV magazine. Email him at kroedel@swiftcom.com with feedback.

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