LIVING WELL

Staying Strong Is More Possible Than You Think

Resistance training matters, but the best plan is one you can begin safely, repeat regularly and build without turning every session into an ordeal.

Strength is built, not preserved in glass

You notice it in ordinary moments. A bag feels less cooperative. Getting up asks for more effort. The temptation is to treat this as a one-way door marked ageing, but strength is not something you can only remember having. Muscles still respond when you ask them to work.

Resistance training means working against a force using weights, resistance bands or your own body weight. In a 2022 review of 21 studies involving 1,610 adults aged 60 or older, it improved upper-limb, lower-limb and handgrip strength. The evidence was described as preliminary, so it does not promise what any one person will achieve. It does show that age does not make strength training pointless.

That review found improvements beyond strength, including physical functioning and several areas of quality of life. Depression and bodily pain also improved. But not every measure moved: researchers found no benefit for vitality, the physical component score, total quality-of-life score or distance covered during a six-minute walk. Resistance training can do useful things without doing everything.

This distinction matters because "staying strong" is sometimes treated as a vague instruction to stay busy. General movement is valuable, but muscle-strengthening work has a specific job. Aerobic activity raises your breathing and heart rate; flexibility work helps your body stay limber; balance work supports stability. Most people benefit from a combination rather than asking one kind of exercise to cover every need.

Heavy is useful, not magical

Strength training attracts rules: lift very heavy, perform a particular number of sets, train until you cannot complete another repetition. The evidence is less theatrical. A 2023 review covering 178 strength studies and 119 muscle-growth studies found that every resistance-training approach examined produced better strength and muscle growth than doing no resistance exercise.

Higher loads produced the greatest strength gains in that review. A separate analysis of 21

studies similarly found greater gains in the heaviest successful lift with high-load rather than low-load training. Yet muscle growth was similar across loading ranges. A lighter resistance is not automatically wasted effort just because it is not the best route to maximal strength.

These findings largely concern healthy adults, not every older person with every health condition. They help explain the trade-off rather than supply a universal plan: heavier loads may be more effective when maximal strength is the goal, while muscles can grow under a wider range of resistance. What is appropriate for you still depends on your health and starting point.

If you have trouble moving or balancing, have not exercised for a while, have health concerns or worry that exercise may be unsafe, speak with your health care provider before you begin. They can help you choose a suitable type and amount of activity. This is where a lifestyle project becomes a medical conversation, not a test of nerve.

The useful session is not the one that proves how hard you can suffer.

You do not have to empty the tank

Training to muscular failure means continuing until you cannot complete another repetition. It can sound like proof that a workout counted. A 2022 review of 15 studies found no significant difference between failure and non-failure training for either strength or muscle growth. You do not appear to need total exhaustion to make progress.

There is an important limit to that conclusion: all the studies in the review involved young adults. Researchers specifically called for more work in older adults. The finding should therefore lower the pressure to chase failure, not become a guarantee that every approach works equally well for every older person.

Exercise order is flexible, too, although priorities belong near the front. A 2021 review of 11 studies found that the largest strength increases occurred in exercises performed at the beginning of a session. Exercise order did not appear to change muscle growth. If one movement matters most to you, doing it while you are fresher is a reasonable way to organise the session.

None of this means effort is irrelevant. Your body adapts to what you do regularly, and gradually increasing the challenge can help you continue to improve. That challenge might mean using slightly more resistance, but building slowly matters. The useful session is not the one that proves how hard you can suffer. It is the one you can perform safely and return to.

The plan has to survive real life

A theoretically excellent programme that keeps disappearing from your week is not excellent for you. Regular practice helps your body adapt, and even short sessions can support progress. Starting slowly also gives you room to increase your activity without pushing too hard all at once.

Enjoyment is not a frivolous extra. Choosing activities you like can make movement easier to repeat. Variety can keep exercise interesting and may help prevent injury or burnout. An accountability partner, a class or a regular check-in can also give the plan somewhere to live beyond your own good intentions.

Strength is only one part of staying capable. Walking, swimming, dancing and cycling are aerobic activities. Standing on one leg and tai chi are balance work. Stretching and yoga support flexibility. Balance exercises may make uneven surfaces easier to manage and help prevent falls, while a strong core-the muscles of your abdomen, back and hips-supports balance and stability.

Pay attention to the line between effort and distress. If you have pain, extreme shortness of breath, dizziness or simply do not feel right while exercising, stop and seek help straight away. Listening to your body is not backing out of the work. It is part of exercising safely enough to keep doing it.

On Monday, choose one starting resistance

Your first move does not require a gym membership or a complicated routine. Choose one kind of resistance you can use at home: a resistance band, a pair of dumbbells or your own body weight. The object matters less than giving your muscles a safe force to work against.

Next, choose movements that involve the parts of your body you want to strengthen, including your core. If one movement is especially important to you, put it first. Keep the session simple enough that you can pay attention to how you move and how you feel rather than juggling a long list.

Begin slowly. Do not chase muscular failure, and do not treat soreness or distress as the price of admission. As the work becomes familiar, you can gradually make it more challenging. Showing up regularly matters more than making the first attempt impressive.

So Monday's step is concrete: clear a safe patch of floor and put a resistance band or pair of dumbbells there. If balance or movement is already difficult, use Monday instead to ask your health care provider what kind of resistance work is right for you. Strength begins with resistance, but the lasting skill is returning to it.

Where this comes from

- Exercise and Physical Fitness

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/exerciseandphysicalfitness.html
- Exercise for Older Adults

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