

What's the Best Way to Exercise for Health and Longevity?

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Exercise outperforms nearly every drug or supplement for extending life and preventing chronic disease, making movement a powerful longevity habit you can build
- › Strength, power, and balance training protect independence and mobility as you age, while even light daily activity — like walking — supports brain health and metabolic stability
- › Sitting for long periods increases risk for more than 30 chronic conditions, including heart disease and dementia, even in people who eat well, highlighting the need to move frequently throughout the day
- › The greatest improvements in health and lifespan occur when sedentary people begin moving regularly, showing that it's rarely too late to reclaim strength, energy, and resilience
- › Combining resistance exercise, daily walking, and simple balance drills offers the most complete protection for your body and brain, extending both lifespan and quality of life

Research across multiple fields continues to confirm that consistent physical activity outperforms nearly every drug or supplement for extending life and reducing chronic disease risk. Exercise doesn't just add years to your life — it adds life to your years by preserving strength, mobility, and independence well into old age.

In a roundtable discussion hosted by Siim Land, exercise scientist Nic Verhoeven and physiologist Greg Potter explored what types of exercise deliver the greatest benefits for longevity and why balance, strength, and power training matter more than ever.¹

Each expert brought a unique perspective: Land, known for his research-driven health content, guided the conversation; Verhoeven, the creator behind Physionic, emphasized the metabolic science of movement; and Potter, Ph.D., focused on sleep, circadian rhythm, and exercise physiology. Together, they broke down the myths surrounding fitness and clarified what actually works for building lifelong resilience.

Across all age groups, sedentary behavior remains one of the strongest predictors of early death. People who sit for most of the day face sharply increased risks of heart disease, diabetes, and cognitive decline. Even short bouts of activity — like brief walks or short bursts of effort — dramatically reduce those risks by improving insulin sensitivity, lowering blood pressure, and enhancing brain function.

The discussion's insights reveal a simple truth: health span — the quality of your years — depends less on extreme workouts and more on consistent, intelligently designed movement. Understanding how to train for long-term vitality is where their conversation begins.

Exercise Acts as the Ultimate Health Multiplier

Consistent movement influences nearly every system of your body. The experts agreed that while nutrition and supplementation get most of the attention, exercise deserves its own praise for health and longevity. As noted by Land, biohackers spend hundreds of dollars on supplements but “can’t run a mile without dying.” The interview’s core message was clear: building and maintaining fitness is one of the most powerful predictors of long-term health.

- **Physical activity lowers risk for major chronic diseases and extends life expectancy** — The discussion highlighted a large body of research showing that **regular exercise** dramatically reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease, Type 2

diabetes, Alzheimer's, and several [cancers](#).²

- **The biggest benefits come from simply getting started** – The experts emphasized that sedentary individuals experience the most dramatic improvements once they begin moving regularly. Whether it's a short daily walk, a few push-ups, or climbing stairs without fatigue, early efforts create the largest jump in health outcomes. This means even small changes – like adding a brisk 10-minute walk after meals – significantly reduces disease risk.
- **Cardiorespiratory fitness and muscle strength are both essential for longevity** – Endurance training (such as walking, jogging, or cycling) and resistance training (like weightlifting or bodyweight exercises) protect against mortality through separate yet complementary pathways. Cardiorespiratory fitness boosts heart and lung function, while [strength training](#) enhances bone density, muscle mass, and metabolic rate.

Both are additive, and people who combine them live longer, healthier lives. In practical terms, this means alternating strength sessions with aerobic activity – something as simple as walking on non-lifting days – offers the best of both worlds.

- **Sedentary behavior independently increases disease risk – even if you eat well** – Potter referenced physiologist Frank Booth's landmark review showing that inactivity alone is associated with at least 35 chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, dementia, and depression.³

Even individuals with healthy diets or normal weight were not spared. Sitting for long hours without movement disrupts circulation, slows metabolism, and impairs blood sugar regulation. The takeaway: no amount of "clean eating" fully offsets the damage caused by [sitting too much](#).

- **Exercise triggers powerful whole-body adaptations that improve health from the inside out** – Verhoeven explained that movement acts as a beneficial stressor, known as "eustress," forcing your body to adapt and grow stronger. This kind of

stress engages nearly every system, which explains why regular movement protects against both metabolic and neurodegenerative diseases:

- Your musculoskeletal system responds by building denser bones and stronger muscles.
- Your cardiovascular system improves blood vessel flexibility and circulation.
- Your metabolic system becomes more efficient at burning glucose and fat for fuel.
- Your nervous system sharpens coordination, timing, and balance.

The Benefits Compound Over Time – ‘Use It or Lose It’ Is the Rule

Land compared aging to living in slow motion: if you don't challenge your muscles, bones, and organs, they deteriorate.⁴ Astronauts lose bone density and muscle mass rapidly in zero gravity because their bodies are not being used.

The same happens, though more gradually, on Earth when you stop moving. Building physical “reserves” early – strong muscles, resilient heart and lungs, and flexible joints – acts like saving money for old age. Once you've built those reserves, maintenance requires much less effort, thanks to your body's “muscle memory.”

- **Your body adapts differently depending on the type of exercise** – Resistance training increases muscle fiber size and bone strength, while endurance training remodels your heart, lungs, and blood vessels to deliver more oxygen during activity.

Both types enhance energy metabolism and **mitochondrial efficiency** – the ability of your cells to produce energy from food and oxygen. These adaptations also improve sleep quality, mood, and cognitive function. The result is a body and brain that stay sharp and resilient well into older age.

- **Exercise also improves brain function and mental well-being** — Physical activity stimulates the release of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a protein that supports brain cell growth, memory, and learning.⁵ Regular exercisers often report better focus, creativity, and **emotional stability**.

Land noted that movement creates a virtuous cycle — as you feel stronger and more confident, you naturally eat better, sleep better, and handle stress more effectively. This loop reinforces self-efficacy, helping you trust your ability to make healthy choices consistently.

- **Overexercising is rare but possible; balance matters** — While exercising too much backfires — **extreme endurance athletes** may experience heart strain or plaque buildup — for 99% of people, the risk of doing too little far outweighs the risk of doing too much.

Moderate activity — such as walking, cycling, or resistance training — delivers nearly all of the longevity benefits without risk. You don't need to train like an athlete to experience profound health gains. Regular, enjoyable movement that challenges your body just enough is the real key to lasting vitality.

What Centenarians and Smarter Training Tell You About Real Longevity

Centenarians aren't gym-goers, but they stay active — and mostly avoid major injuries. Verhoeven emphasized that many long-lived people are physically active even if they don't specifically "go out for a jog," and they also tend to have strong social ties.

Those who reach very old age often avoided disabling injuries that spiral into frailty, a practical lesson to progress slowly and protect joints so you can keep moving for decades. That means consistent, daily movement — yard work, walks, chores — plus intelligent training keeps you in the game long term.

- **Prioritize strength and power for aging well; muscle follows** – Verhoeven’s hierarchy for health puts strength first, power “head-to-head,” and muscle size behind them, because strength and power protect independence later in life.

Potter agreed the three capacities track together and explained that moving with intent to move fast helps recruit high-threshold muscle fibers for power while you build strength. Your action step: lift in the five to 10 rep range on big movements for strength, include some faster, controlled reps for power, and let muscle size come along for the ride.

- **Train bone early, but know you can gain strength at any age** – Verhoeven stressed that bone peaks early – “building that base as strong as possible as early as possible is extremely important” – yet older adults still gain meaningful relative strength when they start lifting, even if **muscle grows slower**.

He also distinguished absolute strength (moving the heavy suitcase) from relative strength (strength per body weight), both of which matter to your daily life. Heavy-enough, well-coached lifts protect bone and build strength whether you’re 30 or 70.

- **VO2 max is a powerful risk marker – but not the whole story** – Potter called VO2 max (maximal oxygen consumption) a “helpful composite marker” of heart-lung fitness that improves risk prediction when added to blood pressure models, but warned against gaming the number – blood donation lowers VO2 max short term yet improves several risk factors.

Land added a practical benchmark: a relative VO2 max of 50 milliliters per kilogram per minute (ml/kg/min) tracked with lower mortality in one study, and many adults can reach this level without becoming endurance athletes. For you, aim to improve performance on a consistent fitness test; don’t chase a lab number in isolation.

- **Keep your VO2 max steady across decades rather than peaking and crashing** – Land argued that maintaining VO2 max as you age is a strong sign you’re doing the right things; he’d rather see a stable line at 50 than a youthful peak that plummets later.

- **Walk more, especially after meals, and aim for a realistic daily target** – The guests highlighted post-meal walks of as little as 15 minutes to improve blood sugar after eating, and discussed step counts showing meaningful mortality reductions around “7,000 steps” per day in some analyses, with others suggesting benefits up to around 16,000 depending on age.

They encouraged tracking steps as one of the few metrics worth watching for most people. I recommend gradually working your way up to one hour of walking daily.

- **Balance, mobility, and loaded stretching reduce falls and keep joints happy** – Verhoeven recommended balance practice from about age 50 to 60 onward, done safely, to strengthen your brain-body positioning system and cut fall risk.

Potter likes single-leg variations for built-in balance, plus **loaded stretches** – such as holding the bottom of a goblet squat 30 to 45 seconds – to increase flexibility, add muscle in long ranges, and even lower blood pressure via isometrics at long muscle lengths. Sprinkle in split squats, controlled step-downs, and a couple of loaded holds each week.

Build Lifelong Reserves with a Simple, Balanced Plan You’ll Actually Follow

The interview makes it clear that sedentary living drives risk across the board, while building strength and cardiorespiratory fitness lowers all-cause mortality and disease risk with benefits. I recommend you focus on effective physical activities you’ll sustain for years – prioritizing strength and power, layering in time-efficient intervals, and anchoring everything with daily movement that protects joints, mood, and blood sugar.

1. **Lift first, lift smart, and make strength your anchor** – I recommend you train whole-body strength two to three days per week with big compound movements such as squats, hinges, pushes, and pulls, using five to 10 controlled repetitions per set so

you build strength and gain muscle as a natural result. Verhoeven places strength at the top of the longevity hierarchy, with power right beside it, because both preserve independence and mobility as you age.

If you lift and do cardio in the same session, start with the lifting to keep force output high. Begin with just one hard set per muscle group per workout and gradually build to around 10 weekly sets per muscle group to optimize results without overstressing your joints.

Heavy lifting isn't your only option, however. If you're older, recovering, or managing injuries, **blood flow restriction** (BFR) training is an excellent alternative. Also known as **KAATSU**, this method briefly limits blood flow in your limbs during light exercise, triggering the same hormonal and cellular growth responses as intense strength training.

- 2. Train your balance like your life depends on it – because it does –** As you age, balance becomes one of the strongest predictors of how long and how well you'll live. I recommend practicing it regularly with simple movements such as single-leg stands, step-ups, or split squats two to three times per week.

These small exercises strengthen stabilizing muscles, improve coordination, and train your brain to stay alert to movement and position. You don't need fancy gear – just your body and a safe space. Staying steady protects you from falls, preserves independence, and keeps you active for life.

- 3. Walk daily and break up sitting to lower risk right now –** Add a 10- to 15-minute walk after meals to steady blood sugar levels and support cardiovascular health. If you spend much of the day sitting, aim for at least 7,000 daily steps, which the discussion identified as a threshold for lower mortality risk, though higher counts may bring extra benefit depending on age and baseline activity.

Use short "exercise snacks" throughout the day – one to three minutes of light movement each hour – to improve circulation and mental clarity. These short bouts keep your metabolism active and make exercise feel easier to sustain long term.

Ultimately, work your way up to one hour of walking daily.

- 4. Protect joints and bones so you can keep training for decades** – Build bone strength early and keep reinforcing it with properly loaded resistance training, since bone density peaks in young adulthood and declines without mechanical stress. For mobility, incorporate loaded stretches like holding the bottom of a goblet squat for 30 to 45 seconds. These long-hold isometrics enhance flexibility, stimulate muscle growth, and even help lower blood pressure by improving vascular response.
- 5. Use “minimum effective dose” programming and avoid the extremes** – Progress slowly, watch recovery signals, and ignore arbitrary time quotas for lifting. If you’re starting later in life, know that relative strength gains occur at any age – just begin conservatively and advance when you feel ready.

For highly motivated exercisers, heed the warning signs of overtraining such as fatigue, poor sleep, and stalled progress; when these appear, rest for a week before resuming. Finally, aim to maintain your VO₂ max rather than peaking and declining with age. Re-test your fitness every few months to ensure steady progress and long-term resilience.

FAQs About the Best Way to Exercise

Q: What type of exercise is best for health and longevity?

A: The best approach combines strength training, cardiovascular exercise, and daily movement. Strength training builds muscle and bone density, while cardio improves heart and lung function. Even light activity like walking or gardening between workouts keeps your metabolism and circulation strong. Together, these habits dramatically reduce the risk of chronic diseases and early death.

Q: How much exercise do I need to live longer?

A: Research shows that about 150 to 300 minutes of moderate activity each week – or roughly 20 to 40 minutes per day – delivers most of the life-extending benefits. What matters most is consistency, daily movement, and avoiding long periods of sitting.

Q: Why is balance training so important as I age?

A: Balance becomes one of the strongest predictors of independence and longevity. Practicing simple exercises such as single-leg stands, step-ups, and split squats two or three times a week strengthens stabilizing muscles and prevents falls. Maintaining good balance protects your brain-body connection and keeps you mobile for life.

Q: How can I start exercising safely if I've been inactive?

A: Begin slowly with activities you enjoy – like walking, light resistance bands, or bodyweight exercises – and focus on good form. Even small improvements in strength and stamina produce large health gains at first. Add more intensity or volume only after your body adapts. The biggest benefits often come from simply getting started.

Q: What's the key to maintaining results long-term?

A: Focus on sustainability, not extremes. Mix activities that build strength, improve endurance, and enhance flexibility while allowing for recovery. Listen to your body and aim for progress, not perfection. Maintaining steady fitness across decades – rather than chasing short-term peaks – is the real foundation of long-term vitality and longevity.

Sources and References

- ^{1, 4} YouTube, Siim Land, What's the Best Way to Exercise for Health and Longevity? August 1, 2025
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- ³ Comprehensive Physiology April 1, 2012
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