

# healthy habits

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## Lower Your **FITNESS AGE**

Improve the quality and even length of your life by focusing on these lifestyle changes.

BY KAREN ASP

**Y**ou may not be able to change your birthday, but that doesn't mean you're destined to act, look, or feel your age. As it turns out, the year you were born doesn't tell the whole story about your physical health, which is why lowering something called your fitness age could be one of the best antiaging strategies.

What is fitness age? Simply put, "It's a measure of how fit you are, regardless of your real age," says Pamela Peeke, MD, MPH, assistant clinical professor of medicine at the University of Maryland in Baltimore, author of *Body for Life for*

*Women*, and a Senior Olympic triathlete. In the past, the best way to determine fitness age was typically a treadmill test to measure your VO2 max, or the maximum amount of oxygen your body can use during exercise. The higher your VO2 max, the higher your fitness. But

recently, researchers in Norway have created a calculator that helps anyone figure out their fitness age. It takes into account numerous variables, including your weight, the frequency and intensity of your exercise, resting and maximum heart rates, and waistline measurement.

Unlike your real age, however, you're not stuck with your fitness age, as you can—and should—lower it, especially if it's equal to or greater than your real age. Besides giving you bragging rights about being younger than you really are, you'll gain additional years in



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life—about one to two years, according to most studies, says Arthur Weltman, PhD, professor and chair of the department of kinesiology and director of the Exercise Physiology Core Laboratory at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. You'll also reduce your risk of developing cancer and cardiovascular disease. Other reasons, though, may be even more compelling. “With a lower fitness age, your quality of life will improve, and you'll be able to do more in life with less fatigue,” Weltman says.

While this might seem obvious, the best way to lower your fitness age is through physical activity. In fact, Peeke documented the impact of physical activity on fitness age by analyzing more than 4,000 Senior Olympians (all of whom have to be over the age of 50 to compete in the Games), and the results were intriguing. Even though the athletes' average age was 68 years old, their average fitness age was 43. “Although we were guessing we might see 15 years' difference, we never would have thought they'd shave a quarter of a century off their real age,” Peeke says.

Fortunately, though, you don't have to have Olympic aspirations to reap the benefits. These strategies will help turn back the clock on your fitness age.

## 3 Ways to Turn Back the Clock



### 1 SHOOT FOR 10,000

A structured exercise program can be daunting, which is why Peeke recommends focusing on moving more throughout the day. To do that, use a fitness tracker, pedometer, or smartphone app to log how many steps you're taking daily, which will help turn movement into a regular habit. Your goal? 10,000 steps per day. To increase those steps, get creative about when you move: Walk the stairs during breaks at work, take your dog for an extra stroll every day, or walk whenever you talk on the phone. Not into tracking steps? Then shoot for a total of 30 minutes of activity five days a week, Weltman says. This won't equal 10,000 steps, but it provides a similar fitness benefit by getting you moving. It doesn't matter how you get there; choose activities you enjoy, and then mix them up.

### 2

#### VARY THAT INTENSITY

Once you've made 30 minutes or 10,000 steps a daily habit, add intensity so that physical activity feels slightly more difficult at times. For instance, you might walk a little faster or choose a walking route with more hills or bigger sets of stairs.

Why does intensity matter? “It'll help reduce your body fat more efficiently, which will decrease your waist circumference and weight, two of the measurements on the fitness age test,”

Peeke says. If you're logging 30 minutes at least five days a week, shoot to make at least one of those days a little tougher than others, Weltman says. He recommends alternating harder days with easier ones to decrease your risk of injuries.

### 3

#### BUILD SOME STRENGTH

Although aerobic exercise should be the mainstay of your efforts, don't forget about strength training. Not only will it help you maintain your independence physically as you age, but new research has found that strength training can also reduce age-related brain shrinkage, especially after you turn 50, Peeke says. Squeeze in about two strength workouts a week, even if you're just doing body weight exercises, like planks, push-ups, and squats.

#### HOW YOUNG ARE YOU?

To calculate your fitness age, visit [worldfitnesslevel.org](http://worldfitnesslevel.org) for a free quiz. If your results are higher than your real age, follow our suggested strategies to lower it. How low should you go, though? The lower the better, of course, but even landing two to five years below your real age can be beneficial, Peeke says. After four months, check your fitness age again to see if you've improved, and continue retesting every three or four months until you're satisfied with where you are.