

## HEALTH

## Exercise boosts longevity in middle and old age, regardless of previous activity levels, study finds

ABC Health & Wellbeing / By Tegan Taylor

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Moving more was associated with living longer, even for people with other risk factors like high blood pressure. (ABC Central Victoria: Larissa Romensky/file photo)

They say you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but a new study shows getting active in middle and old age — even if you weren't active before — can help you live longer.

The study, [published today in the BMJ](#), followed about 15,000 middle-aged and older men and women in the UK for more than 20 years.

The researchers recorded participants' physical activity levels at two points — the beginning of the study and then at roughly the 10-year mark. They then looked at how many people in the study had died by around the 20-year mark.

It found people whose activity levels had increased were substantially more likely to live longer, regardless of their initial activity level or other factors like diet, obesity, blood pressure or cholesterol.

### Key points:

- Study followed 15,000 people over more than 20 years
- People whose activity levels increased lived longer, regardless of previous activity level or other factors like diet, obesity or blood pressure
- Experts say the study's findings are important for both individuals

The findings show it's never too late to start boosting your longevity with exercise, said study co-author Soren Brage of the University of Cambridge.

and policy makers

"It's like putting money in the bank," Dr Brage said.

"You invest in your future health and nothing is ever wasted but it's also never too late."



Maintaining and increasing activity levels were linked to significant changes to risk of death. (Unsplash: sk)

So, how is activity level defined? For the purposes of the study, participants were sorted into three groups:

- **Low:** Those who didn't meet the World Health Organisation (WHO) minimum physical activity guidelines
- **Medium:** Those who did the equivalent of the WHO minimum physical activity guidelines of 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity per week
- **High:** Those who met the WHO recommendations for additional health benefits of 300 minutes of moderate intensity activity per week, or equivalent

Dr Brage said people who maintained a medium level of activity had a 28 per cent lower risk of mortality compared with those who had low activity levels at both time points.

"Twenty-eight per cent is what makes public health researchers jump up and down in joy — that's quite a big effect," he said.

"That's slashing your mortality risk by a quarter."

And there were benefits for those who didn't simply maintain, but increased their activity levels over time.

"Even if they were completely inactive when they started, if they manage to increase their activity level a little bit they could reap benefits."

## **Get active now so you can stay active later**

So, if you're a time-pressed younger person, is this just a licence to sit back and wait until you're older to start getting active? Not quite, Dr Brage said.

"First of all you have to at least survive to old age. So you can't just wait until you retire and then ... start doing some exercise. That's generally a bad strategy."

The findings build on a growing body of evidence that staying active through middle age and beyond has serious health benefits, said Wendy Brown of the University of Queensland, who was not involved in the study.

[Previous research](#) by Professor Brown has shown higher activity levels among older women were linked to extra years of not needing help with daily activities

"Once you get to 70 you're going to be going downhill, whatever you do.  
But if you start higher up the hill it'll take you a lot longer to reach the  
bottom."

While people should do what they could to bump up their activity levels to reap the health benefits, policy makers needed to play their part too, Professor Brown said.

"We've got to focus on these middle-aged Australians because if we don't, we're to be a big burden — I'm one of them — on the health system in the next 10 years."

