Age UK is the new force combining Age Concern and Help the Aged.

With almost 120 years of combined history to draw on, we are bringing together our talents, services and solutions to do more to enrich the lives of people in later life.

The Age UK family includes Age Cymru, Age NI and Age Scotland. There are also more than 170 local Age UKs.

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This guide was first published in November 2010 and updated in September 2011. Every effort has been made to ensure that the information contained in this guide is correct. However, things do change, so it is always a good idea to seek expert advice on your personal situation.

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Introduction

It’s never too late to think about adopting a healthier lifestyle. It doesn’t mean that you suddenly have to change your diet and start spending every day at the gym. Just a few small changes can make a big difference – making you feel better, giving you more energy, and helping you to sleep more soundly. Research shows that having a positive attitude to life in general and to getting older can help you enjoy better health, too.

People who are the least active stand to gain the most by doing a little more, a little more often. Choosing activities that give you an opportunity to meet people socially or play a more active role in your local community can help give you a sense of purpose and achievement, too.

So it’s important not to forget the parts of your body that are crucial to keeping active – your feet, eyes and ears.

This guide highlights changes you may like to consider and the benefits they can bring. Making changes isn’t always easy – but the improvements in your health and wellbeing should be well worth the effort.

Key

ℹ This symbol indicates where information differs for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

❓ This symbol indicates who to contact for the next steps you need to take.
Throughout this guide you will find suggestions for organisations that can offer further information and advice about your options. Their contact details can be found in the ‘Useful organisations’ section (see pages 30–38). Contact details for organisations near you can usually be found in the local phone book. If you have difficulty finding them, your local Age UK should be able to help (see page 30).

As far as possible, the information given in this guide is applicable across the UK.

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Just a few small changes can make a big difference – making you feel better, giving you more energy, and helping you to sleep more soundly.
Staying active

There’s no doubt that keeping active helps us to feel more energetic. But there are other more specific benefits, including helping to:

- manage high blood pressure and angina
- keep yourself at a healthy weight
- maintain regular bowel movements
- stimulate a poor appetite
- strengthen muscles and bones, reducing the risk of falls and fractures
- alleviate discomfort if you have arthritis or Parkinson’s.

Regular exercise also increases production of brain chemicals that lift your mood and make you feel happy – so it can be a good way to deal with stress and anxiety.

Developing stamina, strength, flexibility and balance are important as you get older.
Developing and maintaining stamina, strength, flexibility and balance are particularly important as you get older, and can help you to do everyday tasks more easily as well as enjoy activities more.

**Stamina** helps you to walk any distance, swim, and mow the lawn.

**Strength** helps you to climb stairs, carry shopping, rise from a chair, and open a container.

**Flexibility** helps you to bend, get in and out of a car, wash your hair and get dressed.

**Balance** helps you to walk and climb steps confidently, stand from a sitting position, and respond quickly if you trip.

Any amount of extra activity that is appropriate for your age group and health makes a difference. If you are generally fit and have no health conditions that limit your ability to move around, the Government recommends that you build up to doing two-and-a-half hours of moderate aerobic activity each week, plus two sessions of muscle-strengthening activity a week.

Moderate aerobic activity may leave you feeling warm and a little breathless. It can include:

- walking fast
- cycling on level ground
- pushing a lawnmower.
If you are already active, you can improve your fitness and health by doing 75 minutes of vigorous activity during the week. This can include:

- running
- cycling fast or up hills
- climbing stairs
- playing tennis or football.

If you haven’t been very active before, always build up gradually and speak to your GP before increasing your activity levels significantly. Everyday activities, such as shopping and housework, don’t count towards your two-and-a-half hours of moderate activity as they don’t increase your heart rate enough – but doing some light activity is better than none at all.

Muscle-strengthening exercises include lifting weights (including moving heavy loads such as groceries), doing sit-ups, dancing, heavy gardening and yoga. For more information on improving your strength and balance, see our free guide Staying steady.

Visit the NHS Choices website (see page 36) to read the Government’s physical activity guidelines – there are separate guidelines for older adults (those aged 65 and over) and for adults aged 19–64. Age UK has a tabletop book and a range of exercise DVDs available to order which aim to help improve your strength and balance (see pages 30–31).
Different activities bring different benefits, so try a variety of things. The value of some typical activities and exercise classes are outlined below.

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You don’t have to be moving around to benefit from exercise. If you find movement difficult, chair-based exercises, which you can do while sitting or holding on to the back of a chair, are ideal for improving muscle strength and flexibility.

If you are physically able but find yourself sitting in front of the computer or television for hours at a time, try to break it up and build activity into your day. You can do this by going for a short, brisk walk around the garden or in the street - for example, during the advert breaks or after completing an email or other sedentary task.
However, if you have a health condition that makes moving about difficult or painful, such as Parkinson’s, arthritis or osteoporosis, always consult your GP for help in choosing the right exercise for you. They may be able to suggest suitable activities and may know of special exercises or classes for people with these health conditions. In some areas, your GP may be able to refer you to a structured exercise referral scheme, where trained instructors introduce you to exercise over a period of 12–20 weeks.

Alternatively, you can contact the relevant organisation for your health condition to find out how taking part in an exercise programme could help you (see pages 30–38).

Decide what activities you would like to try and find out more. Your local Age UK may organise a range of activities and will know what else is available. Try your library or leisure centre, too. Volunteer driver or community transport schemes may be able to help if you need transport.
‘Since I started trying to eat my five portions of fruit and veg a day, I always have frozen veg in the freezer, have a banana or apple most days and really enjoy those ready-to-eat apricots with my breakfast cereal. I’ve lost a few pounds too and feel much better.’
Healthy eating

No single food contains everything that you need to stay healthy, so the golden rule is to eat a variety of foods each day. Eating healthily does not mean cutting out foods you enjoy, but simply eating some foods less often and/or in smaller portions, and eating more of other foods. Use the symbols found on many food labels to help you make healthy choices – for example, how to choose items with less saturated fat in them. For more information on how to read food labels, click on the ‘Food labels’ tab on the ‘Food and diet’ section of the NHS Choices website (see page 36).

Eat at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day
Research suggests that people who eat plenty of fruit and vegetables are less likely to develop heart disease, certain cancers and eye conditions. To help you reach the target of five, think of all the fresh, frozen, canned or dried fruit, fruit juices and vegetables you like. Try to choose five different-coloured ones to have with or between meals.

Eat fish at least twice a week
You should aim to have one portion of white fish, such as haddock or cod, and another of oily fish, such as salmon, mackerel or sardines. Oily fish are rich in vitamin D and a type of fat that helps prevent heart disease. But grill, poach or bake fish rather than frying it.
Cut down on salty foods
Salt is essential for health but eating too much of it increases your risk of high blood pressure and stroke. Check the labels on foods such as processed meats, savoury snacks, biscuits, cheese, bacon, some soups and ready meals – much of the salt we eat is already in food when we buy it. Always think before you sprinkle salt on your meal.

Cut down on foods that are high in saturated fat
This includes foods such as cakes, biscuits, sausages, meat pies, fatty meat and cheese. Saturated fats raise the level of cholesterol in the blood and increase the risk of heart disease and stroke.

Drink plenty of fluid; about 6–8 cups each day
This does not have to be water. Tea, coffee, fruit juice or squash will do. It is particularly important to drink plenty in hot weather.

Do I need bran to prevent constipation?
Bran should only be used as a last resort. First, make sure that you have enough wholegrain cereals and fruit in your diet. Drinking plenty of liquids can help too. And physical activity helps keep bowels moving, so try to think of ways to keep active.