

Body

Aging affects every aspect of your body, from your organs and bones to your muscles and joints. But that doesn't mean your physical health has to nosedive as you get older. Taking proactive steps to boost your well-being can bring dramatic payoffs well into the future.

Start with exercise. An active lifestyle can help you maintain strength, flexibility, endurance and balance and let you age gracefully. Strength training is especially important for women, whose bone density peaks in their early thirties and declines sharply after menopause.

Not only will exercise help make your bones stronger, it will also increase muscle mass, which in turn boosts metabolism so you burn more calories at rest. That's good news for avoiding the age-related weight creep that plagues many women. While younger females gain weight on their thighs and hips, older women are more likely to bulge around the mid-section. The effects of this extra abdominal weight show up not only in the mirror but also in the form of increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, blood pressure, and many other illnesses.

What you put in your mouth matters, too. Filling up on so-called "empty calories" like refined carbohydrates taxes your body's systems and saps your energy reserves. Eating plenty of whole grains, lean proteins, and fresh fruits and vegetables will help shore up your overall health.

And don't forget to safeguard your health by getting an annual health exam. Your check-up should include a full blood workup to measure total cholesterol, levels of good and bad cholesterol, and triglycerides. Depending on your age, a pap smear, mammogram, bone-density exam or thyroid test may also be warranted.