

## Staying Healthy in Middle Age and Beyond

Posted on September 24, 2014 | By TU Magazines



### It's Not Magic

Diet and exercise top the list of ways to get — and stay — healthy in middle age and beyond

By Traci Neal/518Life

**It usually hits us around our mid-50s, give or take a few years.** That's when we realize that the body we've neglected, abused or taken for granted for the previous five decades is starting to fight back with bone-cracking, joint-grating intensity.

"A lot of people in their 50s and 60s are looking at being active through their retirement," says Latham personal trainer Jenny May Clermont, whose clients at Fitness Together Latham average age 52. "But they're noticing they don't have the flexibility they used to have, or they're getting winded going up stairs or they can't keep up with their children or their grandchildren." Menopause, she says, can start to slow women



Diet and exercise top the list of ways to get — and stay — healthy in middle age and beyond (Photo: Klaus)

can start to slow women  
down.

and stay healthy in middle age and beyond (Photo: iStock  
Tiedge/GettyImages.)

“As we age, our bones lose density, our muscles lose muscle mass and our joints become stiffer,” precursors to osteoarthritis and chronic joint pain, says George Zanos, an orthopedic surgeon with Capital Region Orthopaedics in Albany. “When you’re looking at maintaining independence and your ability to function, these are the things you have to pay attention to.”

In addition to the pain, these issues often lead to balance and mobility issues and falls, says Kurt Gorrell, a personal trainer at Omni Fitness Center in Albany and an instructor at the Pilates Principle in Latham. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 2.5 million older adults are injured in falls every year.

“When you’re not moving, your flexibility and your joints start to go,” he says. “You get aches and pains so you’re sedentary and your muscles atrophy even more.” This bone and muscle deterioration often leads to more significant health problems. Osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, gout, lupus and fibromyalgia collectively affect 52 million Americans today.

But even more alarming are conditions that over the last several decades have become global epidemics — chronic and growing health concerns such as diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure. World health agencies predict that by 2020 more than half of the American population will have diabetes or pre-diabetes.

“I hate to paint a grim picture,” says Jean M. Bigaouette, an Albany nutritionist, registered dietitian and diabetes educator in private practice, “but obesity, high blood sugar and high cholesterol make one more prone to a heart attack. Having extra weight and/or diabetes makes you more prone to developing high blood pressure too. So they’re all connected.”

With few exceptions, health experts agree that many of these preventable conditions — which cost our country billions of dollars a year — can be controlled, even reversed. And a cure is not all that complicated.

Here are some tips and inspiration for getting or staying healthy in our 50s and beyond, provided by area experts in fitness, nutrition and health.

**Honor thyself:** “So many people put themselves after everything else,” says Marianne C. Romano, a certified nutritionist and registered dietitian at Albany’s Romano Nutrition Consulting. We put ourselves after our careers, our families, even our housework, Romano says, but we “have to continuously remind ourselves that this is our only [body] and we need to honor it and honor ourselves.” Zanos agrees. “I tell people, ‘You have one chance at this world so you’ve got to treat your body right,’” he says.

**It’s never too late:** Clermont’s oldest client is 98 but she was in her 80s when she first came to Fitness Together. “It’s definitely never too late,” says Clermont. “I see all kinds of people who don’t start until after their 50s to take on an active lifestyle. You’d be amazed.”

If you’ve been living a high-stress lifestyle, not eating right, spending [your week] sitting down, “you’re going to have back pain and knee pain,” says Clermont. “A resistance program pretty quickly takes a lot of that pain away. It’s totally possible; we see it every day.”

**Seek a pro:** Sometimes people need motivation, says Bigaouette, “from someone who’s trained in healthy eating and who can better advise a person so not only will they learn better habits but they’ll learn habits they can live with the rest of their lives.”

Everybody “slips,” agrees Romano. “And that doesn’t mean you’re giving up. You can go back and start again.” But when slipping becomes bingeing, “that’s where you need to get some support to get rerouted

back on the track.”

**Ditch the butts:** “Over time tobacco products really affect the aging process,” says Zanaros. “The way you recover from surgery, the way wounds heal, are generally affected by nicotine.”

**Stretch:** A stretching program keeps joints flexible and helps maintain muscle mass, while decreasing the risk of osteoporosis, a disease that weakens the bones and often leads to fractures — most commonly of the wrist, hip and spine, says Zanaros.

**Start slow:** While we can’t reverse the effects of arthritis, Zanaros says by making small changes, we can affect the rate at which our joints wear. “Someone that has a sedentary life, like an office job, I’ll tell them ‘Go for a 15-minute walk at lunch, take the stairs, and after work take the dog for a walk for 15 minutes,’” he says. “It all adds up.”

Romano agrees: “Small, incremental changes add up to big changes over time so it’s important to stay the course and not get discouraged,” she says. “It’s better to walk 10 minutes than to not walk at all.”

The gym itself can be kind of daunting, says Gorrell. “People worry that their knee pain or whatever is going to hurt even more,” he says. “They should express their concerns and they should start slow.”

Low-impact workouts, like walking in a pool, light swimming or water aerobics, tai chi or yoga can often result in quick changes in the body, says Gorrell.

**Hang in there:** “We all want to go back to that comfortable feeling of whatever we had as a bad habit,” Romano says. “But as you’re changing habits and becoming more cognizant of what you’re eating, you’re becoming very self-aware” of the effects food has on your body, and good health becomes easier to manage.

“Getting healthy requires changing habits — which are difficult to change at any point in life,” says Bigaouette. “But you can control your blood sugar by being active and by how much you eat, and that will also have a positive effect on your cholesterol, your blood pressure and your joints.”

**Know the cost:** Diabetes alone cost the nation nearly \$250 billion in 2012, according to the American Diabetes Association, and people with the disease spend more than twice as much as healthy people on health-related costs.

“People might think, ‘Well, I’ll just get medicine to control my blood pressure, my blood sugar, or my pain from osteoarthritis,’” says Bigaouette. “But losing weight helps to make [these] better and may even result in not requiring medication. I see it all the time in my office. It’s easier than a person might think to improve blood sugar or lower blood pressure by changing what you eat.”

## Epidemic, by the numbers

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Diabetes Association, in the United States:



**30 million**  
have or will be diagnosed  
with diabetes in 2014



**71 million**  
have high cholesterol

By 2020, more  
than half of  
American adults  
will have diabetes  
or pre-diabetes

**67 million**  
have high blood pressure



**86 million**  
including half of those age  
65 and older, currently have  
pre-diabetes, a higher-than-  
normal blood glucose level  
that’s not high enough yet to  
be diagnosed diabetes

An epidemic, by the numbers (Illustrations: rhoon/GettyImages.)

**Eat “clean”:** One can maintain a reasonable weight by most of the time having a good diet and eating clean foods,” says Bigaouette. By “clean,” she means foods that aren’t highly processed and that are made with limited or no salt, sugar and fat.

“Processed foods make you want to eat more, and more often,” she says. “Most processed foods have the fiber removed and have added sugar, salt and fat, all of which contribute to gaining weight and overeating.”

Romano says she often recommends a Mediterranean diet, with its emphasis on vegetables, healthy fats and even some animal protein from lean poultry and fish.

“You want to have a mix of protein and carbs at a meal and select a lean protein like tofu or fish and then have a non-starchy vegetable with it, like asparagus broccoli mushrooms, peppers or salad,” she says. “You’re going to have a better effect on your blood sugar.”

Avoid the soda, candy and snack aisles, says Bigaouette. “You’re just tempting yourself.”

**Check your D-fense:** Vitamin D should be checked annually, says Romano. “Many of us are low in vitamin D,” a hormone that promotes the absorption of calcium and phosphorus to strengthen bones. Get vitamin D into your diet by eating eggs; fatty fish, such as salmon; fortified milks (including almond and soy milks) and juices. Also check calcium and vitamin B12 levels during annual physicals.

“If you can eat a diet varied in vegetables and also some fruits you’re going to be getting your vitamins,” says Romano, recommending a diet with “a lot of color.”

**Make a muscle:** “Whenever you create muscle mass you reduce fat mass and become more efficient at burning calories,” says Romano. “You’re creating a more efficient body.”

Clermont agrees, going a step further and calling muscle work “the fountain of youth.”

“A lot of people think, ‘cardio, cardio, cardio’ but after age 40 we tend to lose muscle and that’s where we need to begin,” she says. “Building muscle really is more than just looking good and burning calories. A lot of time that’s the mindset,” but besides the aesthetic benefits, strength training can improve or eliminate joint pain, she says.

**Control your destiny:** “The body is an amazing thing we tend to take for granted, and then we get upset when it doesn’t perform for us,” says Clermont. In truth, she says, we have a lot of control over what’s going on in our bodies.

“Most people want to feel better,” Clermont says. “They want to be able to move better, or not hurt every time they get up out of a chair or go for a walk.”

As we age, she says, maintaining our health isn’t about our reflection in the mirror, “it’s about the quality of our life.” What we put in it, she says, “determines what the body can and cannot do. People are limiting their own body’s ability to repair itself by not eating the proper food.”

---

## Need Help?

Here are some regional events and activities for healthy living:

**Tai chi for arthritis:** The Albany County Department for Aging sponsors eight-week sessions taught by certified tai chi instructors at four sites in Albany County. The ancient practice has been proven to reduce pain and improve mental and physical well-being. Call Lorraine Noval or Marta Banks at Asian Arts Tai Chi School, 518-489-1458.

**Showing of the film, *Going Blind*, and panel discussion about living with vision loss:** Oct. 24, 11:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. Bring a lunch. Albany Public Library, 161 Washington Ave., Albany. For more information call 518-427-4303.

**Medicare, Social Security and Medicaid:** This program for caregivers, part of a series sponsored by the Albany Guardian Society, takes a look at programs for seniors and what they cover. Oct. 31, 9-11 a.m., Albany Guardian Society, 14 Corporate Woods Blvd., Suite 102, Albany. Free, but registration is required. Call 518-434-2140.

**Congregate dining:** Seniors meet at various sites throughout the county for a dietitian-approved hot meal and nutrition education. A service of the Albany County Department For Aging, 518-447-7177.

**Transportation:** The Department for Aging provides transportation to doctor's appointments, grocery shopping and to the congregate dining sites. Call 518-447-7177.

Categories: [Adult Living](#), [Feature](#), [General](#), [Health](#), [October 2014](#)

Tags: [bone density](#) | [diabetes](#) | [diet & exercise](#) | [menopause](#) | [middle age health](#) | [More](#) ▾