

# How to Hit Peak Fitness After 40

You can't train in middle age like you did in your 20s. But if you're strategic, your best days can still be ahead.

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**By Jen Murphy**

Jen Murphy did her first pull-up at 40 and, after training, was able to do 11 by 41. She has covered fitness for years but became a certified trainer in December.

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Not long ago, 40 was considered over the hill in sports. But we are increasingly seeing athletes, like the skier Lindsey Vonn, 40, and the climber Chris Sharma, 43, staging midlife comebacks. Peak performance is still within reach for the rest of us, too. Just look at Ken Rideout, a father of four from Nashville who became serious about distance running in his mid-40s and then one of the world's fastest marathoners his age by his early 50s.

You can absolutely be fitter at 40 or 50 than you were at 30 — it will just take effort, said Dr. Elizabeth Matzkin, an orthopedic surgeon at Mass General Brigham Sports Medicine in Boston. “And you have to approach training differently,” she added.

Many people make the mistake of continuing the same workouts of their 20s into their 40s and beyond, said Dr. Miho Tanaka, who also works at Mass General Brigham, directing the Women's Sports Medicine program. But in order to build resilience in aging joints, most people need to completely change the way they exercise as they get older.

“Your body will adapt, it just takes longer,” she said, especially if you've taken a prolonged break from exercise. And strength and cardio are just one part of your overall fitness equation. You might have been able to get away without warm ups, cool downs, mobility work and proper sleep and nutrition in your 20s. But they become nonnegotiables as we age, she said.

## Why it's harder to train as you age.

Your muscle mass starts declining in your 30s. Gaining it requires ever more work as you get older, far more so for the body's fast-twitch muscle fibers, which are responsible for explosive movements like sprinting, than for slow-twitch endurance muscles. This is why we see more marathoners peaking in their 40s and fewer sprinters, Dr. Tanaka said.

Also, the tendons and ligaments that support your joints get weaker and more rigid, thanks to the same drop in collagen that causes your skin to wrinkle, she added.

After 40, your body simply can't handle back-to-back, high-impact activities like in your 20s. But you shouldn't avoid exercises like running or jumping altogether. Research suggests that weight-bearing activities, particularly higher impact exercise, can help stimulate bone growth, which is especially important for women as they enter perimenopause and menopause.

But you need to introduce impact gradually. For example, if you've never run and decide to tackle a half marathon, it might take you twice as long to prepare in your 40s as it would have in your 20s.

## Build a foundation first.

Whether you're a former collegiate athlete who has taken a couple decades off or a 50-year-old novice inspired to run a 5K, you need to begin by building a foundation.

“If you start to incorporate explosive movements, like jumps and sprints, before you have solid muscle strength and stability, you're going to get injured,” said Amy Schultz, a co-founder of Contra Sports Club, a gym in Los Angeles.

In general, the longer it has been since you trained, the longer it takes to build back a base. Plan to work out at least three days a week with two active rest days for three to six months, she said. Focus on cardiovascular endurance, building muscle mass and stability in your core, hips and shoulders. Aim to increase your level of effort slowly — 5 to 10 percent each month.

Once you have a foundation of strength and stability, you can begin to introduce sports-specific training that includes explosive movements, heavier weights and more intensity.

Former athletes will undoubtedly progress faster because of muscle memory, which allows them to recall specific motor skills, like swinging a golf club or popping up on a surfboard. Those skills usually return a few weeks after you start using them again, Ms. Schultz said.

## Balance intensity and recovery.

Going all-out every workout might have been fine in college, but it probably won't lead to gains in your 40s. It takes more time to recover from exercise as you age. Recovery is important during the base-building phase, but you'll need even more of it when you amp up the intensity.

This doesn't necessarily mean more days off. Each sport has its own demands, but in general, you should cushion your hard training days more as you get older. After sprinting intervals on the track or lifting to the point of failure, say, plan for three moderate training days and one light day, said Mathias Sorensen, an exercise physiologist at the University of California, San Francisco.

Recovery days might include light yoga or low-intensity cardio. A golfer might work on rotational exercises or spinal mobility.

And no matter your age, those hard workouts should change every few months. Lifting the same weight for weeks on end can lead to a workout plateau. You can mix up the number of repetitions, the load or the amount of rest between exercises, Ms. Schultz said. If you need guidance, a personal trainer can help you develop a plan.

## Don't forget the small stuff.

As you age, warm-ups, cool downs and a healthy diet become more important, Dr. Tanaka said. Things like foam rolling and mobility work are often more useful, too.

You also may need to increase your protein intake to repair and rebuild muscle, Ms. Schultz said. It's also important for older exercisers to eat well and limit their alcohol consumption, which experts said could be particularly problematic for fitness. Consider working with a nutritionist and talking to your doctor about supplements to support joint health and bone density.

Sleep is another a critical part of the performance puzzle. If you have to choose between a full night's rest or a workout, prioritize the sleep.

"You can train and eat perfectly, but you won't reach peak fitness if your sleep quality isn't an eight out of 10," Mr. Sorensen said. "This is when our body recovers."

Jen Murphy is a freelance writer based in Boulder, Colo.