

CHAPTER 4

Assessing Your Health And Fitness Constraints



Older adults can maintain a high degree of fitness, but it takes consistent work.

As we age we begin to lose our conditioning faster if we stop

exercising, and it takes longer to get it back. We're also more likely to have our training interrupted or our hiking schedules derailed by nagging injuries, aches, and pains, or other health issues.

That doesn't mean we have to give up our favorite activities! With a little preparation and some ongoing effort we can minimize our down time and keep ourselves fit and ready to hike at anytime!

CONDUCT A SELF-ASSESSMENT

Self-assessment is an essential starting point for any physical fitness program. Getting where you want to go starts with knowing where you are.

Self-assessment is an organized process of recording your own perceptions of your physical condition. If you already have an active physical fitness program you probably already have a pretty good idea of where you stand and what you want to work on. If not, you may want to run through some basic tests.

Remember that your self-assessment is not a competition. There's no passing or failing and no minimum result. You're just looking at how you feel about your own physical condition and deciding what you need to work on, what you're satisfied with, and what you might want to discuss with a doctor before starting an exercise program or going on your first hike.

Consider these areas:

Strength is a key element in physical fitness and in preparation for hiking. Many of us are conditioned to think of strength in terms of upper body strength. While upper body strength is useful and important, the critical elements for hiking are the legs and the core muscles, which keep us stable on uneven terrain. Getting stronger is a worthwhile goal for anyone, and it's especially worthwhile for hikers!

One common test the doctors use to assess leg strength is the

chair stand. You sit on a chair, cross your arms over your chest, and stand up and sit back down as many times as you can in a 30-second period.

Ideally, women from 60-64 years old should be able to do 12 to 17 repetitions and men of the same age 14 to 19 repetitions. But the test is less about achieving a standard than about assessing how you feel during and after the test. If you feel muscle or joint discomfort, dizziness, or instability, stop the test and make a note of what you felt.¹

Core muscle strength is a critical element of maintaining stability and balance while hiking.

One of the easiest tests of core strength and endurance is the plank test.

Put a mat on the ground and lay down flat on your belly. Assume the plank position by lifting yourself up onto your toes and elbows while keeping your back straight.

Hold that position until it becomes uncomfortable or you can no longer hold your back straight. Note how long that takes: you're not measuring yourself against an arbitrary standard, but your doctor or trainer may want to know the time. Your goal is not to meet a certain standard, but to increase your own comfort and endurance and measure your progression over time.

If you have a history of back pain you may wish to use the plank more frequently but for short intervals to increase your core and back strength. This article explains the plank in more detail.

Aerobic fitness is a very important factor in hiking, especially if you're planning on climbing hills.

One common test of aerobic fitness is the 6-minute walk. You can either use a measured environment like a running track or set up cones 100 feet/30 meters apart and walk between them.

You'll walk as briskly as possible and record the distance you cover in six minutes. Discontinue the test if you feel dizzy or nauseated, or if you feel excessive fatigue.

1. <https://www.topendsports.com/testing/tests/chair-stand.htm>

Locate your pulse and measure your heartbeats per minute before starting. After the six minute walk measure your heart rate again, then note how long it takes you to return to your resting heart rate.

Your doctor or trainer can score this test according to a formula that considers your height and weight, but you'll be more concerned with your comfort level during and after the test and how long it takes you to recover to normal breathing and heart rate.²

If it's not easy for you to measure distance, timing a half-mile brisk walk (two laps around a running track) is a good alternative.³

Flexibility is another key fitness measurement and another area where age-related restrictions sometimes appear.

A doctor or trainer will probably use a sitting reach test under controlled circumstances. But you can get an idea of where you stand by sitting on the ground with your legs extended, feet upright, and reaching out toward your toes. If you can reach them, great. If you can't, you'll have a sense of how far you have to go. If sitting on the ground is uncomfortable, you can sit on a chair and put your feet up on a second chair, or reach for your toes from a standing position.⁴

Balance and **agility** are also key points that you'll want to assess. One common test is the "8-Foot Up-and-Go". All you need is a chair, a marker object (a cone, another chair, or almost any object), a little space, and a stopwatch.

Place the marker object 8 feet in front of the chair. Start by sitting on the chair. See how fast you can stand up, walk (not run) around the marker, and return to a sitting position. Average for a man of age 60-64 is 3.8 to 6.6 seconds and for a woman the same age, 4.4 to 6.0 seconds.⁵

For each of these tests, the actual measurement you take is not

2. https://www.physio-pedia.com/Six_Minute_Walk_Test/_6_Minute_Walk_Test

3. <https://www.topendsports.com/testing/tests/walk-half-mile.htm>

4. <https://www.topendsports.com/testing/tests/sit-and-reach.htm>

5. <https://www.topendsports.com/testing/tests/up-and-go-8foot.htm>

about measuring yourself against an average or ideal level. You're observing the way your body reacts to different forms of relatively mild stress. You can also use your results as a benchmark for assessing progress. Your goal isn't to do better than someone else, just to do better than you did last week!

If you're already exercising regularly, these tests may not be very challenging. If that's the case, you probably won't need to conduct fitness tests at all, because your existing exercise program will give you a solid idea of your fitness level.

Finally, evaluating **injuries, pain points**, and **weaknesses** is a critical part of your self-assessment. If you have existing injuries or medical conditions, keep them in mind, and observe how they affect your performance and comfort during physical tests.

If you feel consistent or repeated pain or discomfort, stop the exercise or assessment at once. Note the symptoms and discuss them with your doctor. Pay particular attention to any of these symptoms:

- Pain or pressure in the chest, shoulders, arms, jaw, or neck.
- Dizziness or shortness of breath.
- Cold sweat.
- Heartburn, indigestion, nausea, or abdominal pain.

These can be early signs of a heart attack. Seek assistance at once or call 911. Women may be more likely to experience back or jaw pain, nausea or vomiting, or shortness of breath in the early stages of a heart attack.

If you're interested in expanding your physical testing program, consult a qualified trainer or review this extensive list of physical assessment tests. The Mayo Clinic also provides a useful physical self-assessment program.

CONSULT YOUR DOCTOR

Before you start or resume hiking or any other regular program of physical activity, it's important to discuss your plans with your doctor. Even if you hike regularly, a periodic physical evaluation is important, especially if you're feeling pain or discomfort outside normal muscle soreness during or after a hike.

Your visit with your doctor is a great time to discuss the results of your self-assessment and anything unusual you felt during the self-assessment process. Your doctor may wish to repeat some tests under controlled conditions or add other tests.

These extra tests will help you build a better picture of your current condition. Be sure to discuss any pre-existing medical conditions, old injuries, or discomfort points that you may have identified. Your doctor may wish to send you to a specialist or physical therapist for further evaluation.

Another key factor to discuss with your doctor is medication. Many older people are taking multiple prescription medications on a regular basis. If any of these have potential side effects like dizziness, drowsiness, or anything else related to balance and stability, whether alone or in combination, those side effects need to be considered.

Even if you've never experienced those effects, they could come on when you're tired and under physical stress (like while you're hiking), which is when you least want to deal with them! Your doctor may wish to adjust your dosages or change some medications, and they may also have advice about medications that you should bring with you or that you should avoid while hiking.⁶

Many hikers rely in particular on anti-inflammatory medications (called non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or NSAIDs) like ibuprofen and aspirin to control aches and pains during and after hiking.

Some individuals and websites rather casually recommend

6. <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/balance-problems-and-disorders>

routine or even preventive use of these medications. That can be hazardous. NSAIDs have a range of potential side effects, especially when used continuously or when used in combination with other drugs.

If you experience chronic pain or tend to rely on NSAID drugs for pain relief, then you may want to discuss routine pain management with your doctor and get recommendations on what medications to use. Also make sure to ask how long it's safe to use them and in what doses.⁷

Don't be disappointed or discouraged if your self-assessment doesn't give you the results you wanted or expected. Very few of us start out where we want to be! A self-assessment is a starting point for your fitness journey, and with consistent work those initial results will soon be left behind.

There's also good news: you can still hike at almost any fitness level. You may want to start with short walks on level ground (riverside, lakeside, or seaside hikes are often flat and provide great scenery), but you can still get out and walk!

Your hikes will be an integral part of your training program: walking is one of the exercises that doctors and trainers most consistently recommend for fitness gains. One of the best ways to train for hiking is simply to hike!

Before you start hiking – and before you start any fitness program – you will need to consider any existing injuries or physical problems that may affect your hikes or your exercise programs. Let's look at some common problems and how you can manage them.

7. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4809680/>