

**AARP
PERSPECTIVES
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MODERN Maturity

LIFE LINES

BACK TO EXERCISE (BAD BACK ASIDE)

BY EDWARD JACKOWSKI

When Bob walked into my office six months ago, he could barely walk. Leaning heavily on a cane, he described to me how the bad back he had developed in his early 40s completely derailed his fitness routine and how now, at age 60, he feels like an old man.

I've seen my share of men like Bob during my 17 years of educating people about fitness. A bad hip, knee, or back causes them to stop exercising altogether, and before they know it they have a hard time even walking. That's no coincidence. The phrase "use it or lose it" is true even for everyday activities: walking, climbing stairs, getting in and out of the car.

The problem is that many people with bad backs or knees believe they *can't* exercise, when what they need to do is change the way they exercise. Walking is great, but what happens when a bad back or knee prevents you from walking at a pace vigorous enough to ensure fitness benefits?

Bicycling is one exercise that almost everyone can do, regardless of fitness level or orthopedic constraints. It can strengthen the quadriceps muscles, which help protect the knees. And a recumbent bicycle—with its lumbar support and lower center of gravity—puts much less stress on your back.

Exercising in the water also provides adequate resistance without putting undue stress on your joints. If you need to lose weight, try combining water exercises (pool running, water aerobics) with some other form of aerobic activity.

The following exercise program is designed for people with a bad hip, knee, or back. After three months on a similar program, Bob was walking pain-free and without a cane for the first time in years.

For this workout, you will need a stationary bicycle (a recumbent bicy-

cle if you have back pain); a firm exercise mat; and a commitment of about 45 minutes every other day, eventually working up to about 60 minutes. Remember: Check with your doctor before beginning any exercise program. The workout has five steps:

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1. Bike for 20 to 30 minutes with light to moderate resistance at 70–90 rpm (revolutions per minute). Although your effort level may be hard to calculate exactly, 70–90 rpm should feel as though you're going fast but not so fast that you can't carry on a conversation at the same time.

2. Stretch for 5–8 minutes, working on the spine, hamstrings, quadriceps, groin, triceps, and shoulders (see Fitness in the November–December 1998 issue for proper stretching technique). Hold each stretch for 30 seconds, without bouncing; repeat.

3. Exercise your abdominals with 15–25 repetitions of crunches and reverse

crunches. Reverse crunches are similar to crunches, but instead of bringing your shoulders toward your knees, bring your knees in toward your shoulders while keeping your lower back pressed firmly into the ground.

4. Bike for 10 minutes at 80–100 rpm.

5. Cool down for 2 to 3 minutes at an easy pace (50–70 rpm).

If necessary, bike at a slower speed until you become more fit. After a month or so, increase the number of abdominal exercises and time on the bike. Your goal should be to bike 30–45 minutes without a break. ■■■

Edward Jackowski is the CEO of Exude Fitness in New York City. Exude is on the Web at www.exude.com; e-mail your questions to edward@exude.com.

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