



ACTIVE AGING IN THE OUTDOORS IN CHATTANOOGA

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As the temperature begins to cool down, the air becomes crisp and the leaves start changing to beautiful hues of red and orange, we all feel the urge to get outdoors in the beautiful Tennessee Valley. Being outdoors has been shown to boost immunity, reduce risks of depression, improve memory and focus, decrease stress levels and improve sleep for individuals of all ages. These are all wonderful side effects of being outside and enjoying nature. However, getting outside — whether to walk in a local park, hike on one of the amazing trails, bird watch in a wilderness area, bike on the Riverwalk or kayak/canoe in our waterways — might be overwhelming for someone who has

not spent a lot of time outside before. This is especially true for an aging adult. The great news is that it is never too late to get involved in a recreational activity to gain the benefits listed above. We are all aging, right? Medical and public health advances have significantly increased life expectancy and healthy life years over the past century. These trends have made it far more possible for more people in mid-life and later to participate in sports and exercise to stay fit. Physical activity implemented at any age will improve strength, mobility, flexibility and balance. Here are some basic exercises to help improve those abilities so you can make the most of what the outdoors has to offer.

BALANCE

Balance is so important when playing outdoors, whether you are hiking on the Guild-Hardy Trail or SUPing on the Tennessee River. Before tackling these activities, you may want to work on improving your balance by challenging it in a safe, familiar environment.

- ▶ Standing with your feet together, perform progressions — move your arms in different directions; turn your head and/or rotate your body; close your eyes — all while maintaining your balance.
- ▶ Standing with one foot in front of the other (known as “tandem”) or in a single-leg stand position, perform all of the variations listed above.
- ▶ Practice your dynamic balance by walking heel to toe on level surfaces while varying step length; side step; cross over or do a braiding-type walk (called “carioca”); walk on your toes or heels (this has the added benefit of strengthening your ankles).



STRENGTH

Maintaining and building good strength in your muscles is an important aspect of being able to enjoy outdoor recreation. We need strength to maintain balance, bike, climb or descend any of the various paths throughout our region, get in/out of a kayak, and carry a backpack. With the use of resistance bands, ankle weights or even just body weight, you can build sufficient strength in your legs and trunk to help you navigate most outdoor activities. The following are all great ways to start, with or without resistance.

- ▶ Repeatedly sit/stand from a chair without using your arms for help.
- ▶ Do leg lifts in a single-leg stand (move opposite leg out to side, front and back).
- ▶ Repeatedly raise up on your toes.

RATE OF PERCEIVED EXERTION SCALE

The RPE scale allows you to monitor the intensity of your workouts by focusing on how hard you feel you are working rather than looking at heart rate and other measures. Often HR can be skewed by medications that you are taking, so it is not always a reliable measure of exercise intensity.

0	Rest	
1	Extremely Easy	Restful breathing, can sing
2	Very Easy	Can talk in complete sentences
3	Easy	Can maintain for hours
4	Moderate	Talking becomes broken
5	Somewhat Hard	Heavier breathing begins
6	Moderately Hard	Deep breaths, talking is avoided
7	Hard	Deep forceful breathing (but still sustainable)
8	Very Hard	Labored, cannot talk, cannot maintain beyond a few minutes
9	Very, Very Hard	Very labored, breathless. Can only hold 1 minute
10	Extremely Hard	Gasping for air, 5-20 second maximum

FLEXIBILITY

As we get older, we begin to lose some flexibility as a result of the normal aging process. Some conditions, such as osteoarthritis, can also cause feelings of stiffness in our joints and muscles and result in an even greater loss of flexibility. However, to enjoy the outdoor activities around our beautiful area, we need to gain and maintain as much flexibility as we can. Luckily, this can be accomplished through movement and stretching.



Before you begin your activity, make sure to warm up and prepare your body for your adventure. Warm-up could include beginning the activity (like a walk or hike) at a slower pace, stretching your muscles and doing a few movement based exercises (such as raising up and down on your toes, squatting, marching in place, arm circles and deep breathing, to name a few).



You should also do a cool-down after finishing your adventure, utilizing some of the same components of the warm-up plus some static stretches.



Here are a few more tips for when you are ready to get out and safely enjoy the natural beauty surrounding you here in Chattanooga.

▶ **Seek advice.** Always check with your physician before beginning an exercise program, and visit a local physical therapist — particularly a board certified geriatric specialist for those over the age of 65 — who can direct you in a progressive program to build strength and bone health while improving your flexibility and endurance. Also, contact local groups/clubs such as Rock/Creek Adventures, Outdoor Chattanooga, Chattanooga Nature Center and the Chattanooga Ornithological Society for guided activities and resources.

▶ **Know before you go.** Be aware of a map of your route and alert a close family member or friend of where you will be.

▶ **Understand your limits.** Utilize the Borg Scale of Perceived Exertion to monitor your exertion level. In order to achieve optimal cardiovascular benefit and remain safe during exercise, it is recommended that healthy individuals exercise at a level of 4-5 for moderate intensity and 6-7 for vigorous intensity. (See table)

▶ **Pack smart.** Staying hydrated and packing a light snack while outdoors is crucial to your health and will make your adventure more enjoyable. Trekking poles are a great tool to help with balance. All of the best gear can be found at Rock/Creek Outfitters, our Get Out Coalition partner, in Chattanooga. Also think about packing a cellphone for emergencies and to take some beautiful pictures so you can show off your adventures. Consider taking a friend or family member with you to share your experience!



OUTDOOR COALITION PARTNERS

