Addressing common concerns about exercise after 50

(MS) — Exercise is an essential element of a healthy lifestyle. Including exercise in your daily routine can lower your risk for diabetes, heart disease and stroke, and exercise can even sharpen mental acuity, reduce anxiety and improve mood. But as beneficial as exercise can be, many men and women, particularly men and women over the age of 50, who have not laced up their sneakers in years are hesitant to begin an exercise regimen for a variety of reasons, potentially putting their long-term health at risk.

Regardless of a person’s age, beginning a new exercise regimen can be intimidating. But it’s especially so for men and women over the age of 50, who might not know where to begin or how to approach adopting a healthier lifestyle. According to the National Institute on Aging, the following are a few points men and women should know as they attempt to improve their physical fitness with a more active lifestyle.

* Exercise is safe even if you have not been physically active in a long time. Many older men and women worry that suddenly embracing physical fitness after years of inactivity may be detrimental to their health. But that’s only true if men and women don’t exercise caution at the outset of their routines. When beginning the routine, take things very slowly at first, choosing to walk or bike every day rather than hitting the treadmill and adjusting it to maximum resistance. When strength training, start off with very little weight so your muscles can grow accustomed to the motions and you can get the exercises down pat. As you grow more comfortable and your body starts to feel more up to the challenges of daily exercise, you can begin to gradually alter your cardiovascular and strength training workouts to make them more challenging.

* Exercise can make existing medical conditions more manageable. Men and women over the age of 50 who have preexisting medical conditions are likely to find that exercise alleviates rather than exacerbates their physical problems. The NIA notes that studies have shown that regular exercise and physical activity can benefit people with arthritis, high blood pressure and heart disease. But it’s still recommended that men and women with preexisting medical conditions consult with their physicians before making any lifestyle changes. Some conditions may affect a person’s ability to be active, and it’s best to get the go-ahead from a physician before beginning an exercise regimen. Doctors may even suggest certain activities that have been known to alleviate particular conditions.

* Exercise reduces fatigue, so sitting around to preserve strength is not effective. Exercise improves strength and energy levels, so sitting on the sidelines to preserve your strength is counterproductive and could lead to serious medical problems. The "Report on Physical Activity and Health" from the U.S. Surgeon General’s office noted that men and women who are inactive are almost twice as likely to develop heart disease as those who are more active. While getting adequate rest and giving your body ample time recover from physical activity is essential, your body won’t benefit by avoiding exercise to preserve your strength. However, even moderate physical activity performed on a regular basis can reduce fatigue.

* No one is too old to exercise. It’s not uncommon for men and women in their golden years to think they are too old to exercise. Some may feel that their toned down workouts cannot possibly be making much of an impact thanks to the physical limitations old age has put on their bodies, while others may think it’s unwise for someone in their 70s or 80s to be physically active. But no one is too old to exercise, as exercise helps the body stay strong and fit even when you can no longer max out on the bench press or squat hundreds of pounds. Scaling back your exercise routine will be necessary as you get older, but that does not mean you cannot still enjoy and benefit from physical activity.

Continuing to exercise as you age is a great way to improve your quality of life and stay as active as possible well into your golden years.