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Today's Baby Boomer Horse Riders Redefining "Middle-Age"

Baby boomer women are currently the largest and most financially powerful demographic group in the U.S. Unlike our mothers, we don't plan to sit in a rocking chair and knit, quietly watching the world pass us by. Not now, or twenty years from now. We are redefining what it means to be "middle-aged". We look forward to decades ahead of a happy, healthy, active lifestyle. More and more older women are continuing an active, even competitive, horse riding career into their 60's and 70's. In greater numbers than ever, the so-called "mature women" are just beginning to live their life-long dream of horse ownership.

Sure, the kids have their youth and that sense of immortality, but we have the intelligence and self-discipline to research and do our "homework" to solve horse training problems, improve our riding skill, learn about horse psychology or whatever is needed to overcome obstacles as they arise. Also, most baby boomers have more spendable income now than any other time in our lives, which can help eliminate some of the obstacles we may have had in our youth.

With the right mindset, physical fitness (and a couple of handy gadgets) there's no reason we shouldn't continue riding well into our later years. In fact, research shows that horseback riding in people over 40 is actually very beneficial. To read more click on [The New "Older" Rider](#)

Six Defy-Your-Age Strategies, an excerpt from Tips to Keep Riding Midlife and Beyond

By Jennifer Forsberg Meyer on DiscoverHorses.com

#1 Be Fit, Strong, Flexible. This is the biggie in terms of defying your age. As the experts will tell you, there is a fountain of youth...it's called move your body. When we were young, being strong and flexible enough to ride a horse was a given; that level of physicality is still attainable at midlife, but we must work for it--although not as hard as you might think.

"What we're talking about here is 'serviceable fitness,' sort of analogous to serviceable soundness in horses," explains Katie Phalen, a longtime riding instructor in Clarksville, Md. "You need just a basic level of physical fitness for balance and effectiveness in the saddle, and to keep yourself safe."

So what must you do to achieve this basic level? A bottom-line ideal is 30 minutes of aerobic activity (enough to cause you to break a sweat) on most days, plus 10 to 15 minutes of strength and flexibility work on two or three days per week.

If you can't manage 30 minutes daily, start with five or 10 minutes and work up as you begin to notice results and develop a habit. Contrary to what experts used to tell us, all physical activity of any duration counts, so any amount you do will start moving you toward your goal.

Walking briskly is excellent aerobic exercise; if the weather precludes walking, use a stationary bike or climb the stairs in your home for an equivalent period. Your goal over time is to get your resting heart rate down to about 60 beats per minute (or, for easy measurement, 15 beats in 15 seconds). This will improve your endurance, as a slower pulse means your heart doesn't have to work as hard to get the job done. (If you've not exercised before, do ask for your doctor's OK before initiating a program.)

So, getting the heart beating is one part, and for the others--strength and flexibility work

The key, of course, is to modify routines so they'll work for you and you can remain faithful to them. When you do, you'll be amazed at how much more youthful and active--and ready to ride--you'll feel. And those age-related aches and pains? Greatly reduced--or gone.

"What's made a huge difference for me is returning to yoga," says Debbie Moors, a Berthoud, Colo., pleasure rider who's successfully managing old injuries in her knees and foot arches, plus new tenderness from bursitis in a shoulder and tendonitis in an elbow. "A 20-minute practice early in the morning means I'm not hobbling as I was before. I'm able to go out to the barn and be active."

Of course, the other part of the fitness equation is healthful eating, which is simply consuming an appropriate number of nutrient-rich calories for your level of activity. Nothing new here--just eat real food in moderate amounts, and skip the junk.

Specifically, put your emphasis on vegetables, whole grains, low- or non-fat dairy, and lean meats, while voiding empty carbohydrates such as white bread and sweets (including that barn area staple, soda).

When you get in shape to ride, you earn overall life-enhancing bonus points, too. Increased endurance, strength, flexibility, and balance pay huge dividends as you age by building up your heart and protecting you from the injuries (notably hip fractures) that can quickly lead to frailty and declining health.

#2. Rethink Your Horizons. The riding-achievement goals you once had likely no longer suit you, and that's natural. So change them.

"I was gutsy and competitive in my 20s and 30s," says Sue Pearson Atkinson, a pleasure rider in Shingle Springs, Calif. "In my 40s and 50s--and now in my 60s--I want riding to be fun and safe, period. Plus, I've discovered that the older I get, the more interested I am in the relationship/partnership with my horse. I love the challenge of learning more about this."

Indeed, acquiring natural horsemanship skills is a favored new goal for midlife riders, and educational opportunities for this abound in magazines, books and DVDs and at clinics (look online and inquire at local retail outlets for what's happening in your area).

Trail riding is another popular midlife activity, either informally with friends or as part of the low-pressure competitive opportunities offered by a growing crop of groups.

An important part of setting and meeting new goals is working with a pro. An instructor who understands everything you're dealing with (from physical limitations and time constraints to prior experience and fear issues) can help you decide where you want to go and how you're going to get there. This keeps your riding sessions productive and enjoyable.

"Get a good coach who can encourage, challenge, and inspire you," says Paula Zdenek, whose Whispering Hope Equine Training Center in Placerville, California, deals with many midlife clients. "He or she can help you focus on what you're capable of, and improve that to its fullest extent."

"This will require commitment on your part," Zdenek adds. "Consistency is important, so schedule your lessons on your calendar and make them a priority the way you would any other appointment."

#3. Ride the Right Horse. Note that this particular strategy addresses every one of our midlife goals--that's how important riding the right horse is. You can't have fun if your horse intimidates you, or be safe if he's hard to control, or be comfortable if he bucks you off, and...you get the idea.

"I can't ride the same horse I did in my 20s and 30s," observes Mary Watts, a pleasure rider and trail enthusiast from Wagener, S.C. "I want any horse I ride now to be safer, smarter, slower, and sounder."

This requirement can be tough, however, if the horse you have and love now turns out not to be the one you need at this point in your life. If so, "you need the wisdom to sell or switch horses," insists Shelly Mix, a barrel-racing enthusiast from Harrisburg, Pa. "A reliable horse at this stage of life means no fights, whether on the ground or in the saddle."

If you do find yourself seeking a new horse, don't discriminate against one with a little age; for your purposes, older can be better, anyway.

"We more mature riders appreciate the stability and wisdom an older horse offers," says Steve Price, a New York City horseman who's been riding for almost 60 years. "Though nothing in life is certain, entering into a partnership with a horse that's seen and done it all is as close as you can come to an insurance policy."

Alternatives to buying if you do need a new mount are share-leasing a friend's horse, or riding lesson horses at a barn that has them.

#4. Get in (the Right) Gear. Items that may prove helpful to midlife riders:

- Extra-cushioning saddle pad. It will reduce jarring to your lower back, plus help your horse stay comfortable under you.
- Tush cushion. This extra pad for the seat of your saddle can provide an even more comfortable, cushioned ride.
- Helmet. Aging is hard enough on your gray matter; protect it from injury in the event of a mishap or fall.
- Crop and/or spurs. Though you may not have needed them before, these tools may be handy in midlife and beyond, depending on your horse. "Learn how to use them to compensate for loss of strength in your seat and legs," suggests Patty Brumley of Portland, Ore., whose students include older riders.
- Broad-spectrum sunscreen. Aging skin is especially vulnerable to damage from the sun, so make sure the product you use protects against all UV rays and will stay on when you're active.

Beyond that, "never be too proud to use a mounting 'assist,'" advises Bonnie Davis, whose Two Horse Enterprises (twohorseenterprises.com) offers products and educational materials for trail riders of all ages. "Rocks, stumps, trailer fenders, mounting blocks, a rise of ground--your horse should stand quietly next to any of these. This is especially important for those of us with bionic parts--I've had a knee replaced, and I always use a mounting block or whatever's available."

#5. Share the Love. If possible, get involved with like-minded friends. "Surround yourself with people who share your riding goals," says Paula Zdenek. "They'll be your support system, challenging and inspiring you. Someone will always want to be doing something with the horses, and will invite you along. It's much more fun this way."

If appropriate, include your own family in your horse activities, as well. "I'm hoping to involve my girls more at the barn come this spring," says Debbie Moors. "Making it a family activity allows it to be much easier to find the time."

Sharing your love of riding is another area where the effort involved will benefit not just your horse life, but also your health in general. Why? Research shows that people who involve themselves with others are less likely to suffer stress or develop dementia. Nice bonus!

#6. Lighten Up! Keep things in perspective, and maintain a positive attitude at all times.

"I work with so many midlifers who engage in negative self-talk," comments Zdenek. "They say, 'I'm too old for this,' or 'I'm too short/too fat,' or 'My joints ache too much.' They seem to have it in the back of their minds that riding, for them, is a pipe dream that will never really work. And that shows in their riding. I always counter, 'Concentrate on what you can do. Keep a sense of humor. Enjoy yourself, and your horse, in all the moments you have together.'" And to that we say, Amen.

