Which Sports are Best for Longevity?

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MAY. 28, 2025

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More than a workout, sports offer physical, mental, and social benefits that may extend your life by nearly a decade.

If your goal is to stay as healthy, active, and engaged for as long as possible, you might want to pick up a racquet. Research over the past few years has found that racquet sports are likely more beneficial to longevity and **healthspan** than other forms of exercise.

The first large study to report on this phenomenon was the **Copenhagen City Heart Study**, which after following more than 8,500 people for 25 years, concluded that people who regularly played racquet sports increased their lifespan by almost a decade longer than sedentary people. Tennis players fared the best, living an average 9.7 years more, while badminton players increased their lives by 6.2 years. By comparison, those who exercised alone experienced milder increases in lifespan: cycling (3.7 years), swimming (3.4), jogging (3.2), and working out at the gym (1.5).

The study authors surmised that the social nature of these sports is key to their longevity benefits, a theory that's widely **supported**.

In a 2025 review, researchers **concluded** that in addition to racquet sports' physical benefits, namely improved cardiovascular function and musculoskeletal health, their interactive nature offers "crucial mental health benefits." And specifically, by fostering social connection, they prevent loneliness and depression.

Meanwhile, other studies have found that adults over age 50 who participate in group sports are more likely to **remain active**, and that people who exercise with others tend to go **longer**, feel more committed and motivated, and **enjoy** it more.

What the research says

Need more reasons to pick up a racquet? Consider this:

- A **large cohort study** of more than 272,000 adults (ages 59-82) conducted by the National Institutes of Health and AARP found that 7.5-15 hours of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise was associated with 13% lower mortality risk compared to non-exercisers, with racquet sports and running offering the greatest reductions. But racquet sports provided the most protection from cardiac death.

Which sports are best for longevity?

So far, no studies have compared the longevity traits of different racquet sports, but tennis, badminton, and pickleball are accumulating a promising body of research.

- **Tennis:** A 2020 study published in the *International Journal of Exercise Science* reported that regular tennis players over age 45 have lower rates of heart disease and obesity than non-players. And a **2024 survey** of British tennis players found that people who played at least once a week reported a 13% higher rate of well-being than people who did not play tennis.

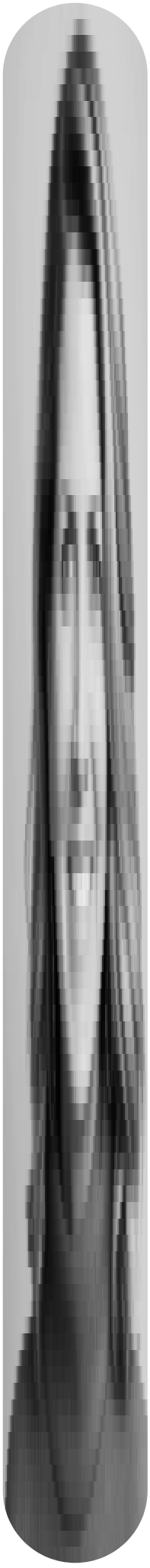
- **Badminton:** Researchers in Japan **discovered** that 30 minutes of moderate-intensity weekly badminton play can enhance cognitive function, and 3 hours of recreational play per week can effectively manage blood pressure. They also concluded that 100 minutes per week of play was enough to help manage midlife depression, a risk factor for dementia.

- **Pickleball**: A **2023 review** found that pickleball players experience psychological benefits including personal well-being, sense of life satisfaction, decreased rates of stress and depression, and overall happiness, prompting the researchers to conclude that "pickleball shows potential as a new tool to work and improve people's mental health." These findings may also explain why pickleball is the fastest growing sport worldwide — between 32-50 million Americans alone **played** at least once in the previous year. (And if you think pickleball is only for older folks, think again. The average age for beginning pickleball players is now **35**.)

We know that regular exercise is essential for longevity and thriving: Adults should aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity per week, 2-3 sessions of resistance training, and regular balance practice. And, having a robust social life consistently ranks among the top factors that lead to a long, healthy, happy life. So, maybe consider joining a pickleball class, dusting off your tennis racquet, or finding a local squash or badminton court to get your game on!

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