

Fit to run - at 50, 60 and 70

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Yes, you can! ... it's never too late to take up jogging.

Is there an age limit to tying on running shoes? If there is, it may be older than you think. Annie Crawford is a fitness instructor who's used to coaching people in their 40s, 50s and older who once thought they couldn't run - and now know the buzz of crossing a finishing line in a nine kilometre run or a tougher 21.1 kilometre half marathon.

She's the brains behind [Can Too](#), which offers free training in running or ocean swimming in return for fundraising for cancer research. But since Can Too's launch six years ago – in which time it's raised \$6 million – the number of older runners has grown, says Crawford. Of around 1500 people training with Can Too for the running or ocean swimming events this year, almost 10 per cent are over 50.

One of them is Deb Christie who, at 50, began her first training session with Can Too last March. Back then she couldn't jog for more than 300 metres and was driven, not by an urge to get fit, but by the idea of supporting young research scientists. Although the thought of training with a bunch of 20 or 30 year-olds seemed daunting at first – it wasn't for long.

“The sense of camaraderie was great – it didn't matter whether you were a runner or not, or whether you were overweight or were older – everyone's equal,” says Christie who's now training for her fourth half marathon in Melbourne this October.

Meanwhile, in Sydney, among the older runners getting ready for this month's Blackmores' Half Marathon on September 19 is Margaret-Anne Hayes, 70. What's truly remarkable about Hayes isn't just that it's her third half marathon (or that she's raised \$45,000 in three years) but that she didn't attempt running until she was 67.

“It's given me a feeling of wellbeing – it's pushing the oxygen around your body and that's good for you,” Hayes says. “It also does a lot for your balance and strength as you get older, but psychologically there's also the feeling that you're making a difference by funding research.”

Also training Sydney with Can Too, but for the 9 kilometre Bridge Run is 73-year-old David Keetley, a former runner who, after a gap of ten years, took up running again this year to raise money for cancer research following the death of his wife Cherie.

“I've lost 10 kilos and I'm leaner and fitter – I seem to be able to have a longer day now without getting tired,” he says. “I think it's also taken some of the pressure off dealing with the loss of my wife – because running is physically demanding it's a distraction. It's also a great thing to be able to keep with younger people – it makes you feel good.”

But how does Can Too's team of coaches get older novice runners into shape without risking injury? By taking it really slowly, says Annie Crawford.

“People think that when you run you have to run really fast – and that's what makes them give up. But we teach our runners to take it slowly until they're fitter – they can be running at the pace of brisk walk until their fitness improves,” she explains. “We get people to jog/walk for 30 minutes for the first week and gradually increase the pace to a slow jog. People gradually get faster without realising it.”

Besides getting would-be runners to improve their fitness, Can Too's training program also strengthens the deep abdominal 'core' muscles that are important for stability as you run.

“People who aren’t used to exercise don’t have a strong core and that can put stress on other muscles and has the potential to cause injury,” says Crawford, adding that coaches also focus on preventing injury by getting runners to stretch and strengthen muscles, and spend time warming up before training sessions to avoid injury.

As for what’s behind the increase in older runners turning up to train with Can Too, Annie Crawford thinks there’s a shift in attitude - "People feel capable of doing things at an older age and they also want to stay healthier."

Research from Stanford University in the US suggests that the reward from sticking with running might be better health in the later years too. A 2008 study in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* following 500 runners for more than 20 years found that the runners – by then in their 70s and 80s - had less disability, less heart disease and less neurological disease compared to a similar group of non-runners.

Have you surprised yourself by becoming fitter than you thought possible?