

Exercise and Ageing

Regular, physical activity and exercise can drastically improve the functional abilities of older adults, especially the ability to stay mobile and thus independent. This remains true, and even more important, as one ages. Here's how to go about it.

Benefits of regular exercise

Regular exercise, even initiated late in life, can substantially increase both strength and endurance and help fight the effects of ageing. Studies undertaken have repeatedly shown that regular, moderate-to-vigorous exercise can help prevent or delay the onset of hypertension, obesity, heart disease, osteoporosis, and the falls that lead to hip fractures. Healthy and fit older individuals cope better with, and have even been able to reverse, some of the physical declines associated with inactivity and ageing. In fact, any form of exercise -- even in advanced age — can serve as a primary prevention tool and has even been associated with reduced death risk. Here's how....

Maintaining muscle strength

Even though maximum muscular strength is usually reached between 20 and 30 years of age it can be fairly well maintained with the help of exercise and other activities, until approximately 60 years of age. Muscle strength decreases more rapidly when the individual becomes less active and also declines faster in the lower portion of the body than in the upper body. Muscles used on a regular basis are able to maintain their strength to a greater degree than muscles used less frequently. To maintain muscle strength and endurance you will need to do resistance or weight training. However, do not try this on your own - join a gym or consult a professional, it is well worth the effort!

Maintaining cardiovascular health

Cardiovascular (heart and lung) fitness and health can be maintained by doing aerobic exercises such as walking, running, swimming, and cycling, to name a few.

Cardiovascular aerobic exercise involves the vigorous, constant, steady motion of the muscles and increases the body's demand for oxygen-rich blood. It strengthens the heart muscle and forces the heart and lungs to work harder and more efficiently.

Exercising for 20-30 minutes three times a week will not only help strengthen your heart muscle but will also make you strong and fit. Being strong and fit will make you more alert, give you greater endurance and strength, and a feeling of well-being.

Although vigorous exercise may provide more cardiovascular benefits, moderate low impact physical activities such as cycling and swimming are nearly as beneficial and convey less risk of injury. They place less stress on the joints and are associated with less risk of injury.

Maintaining bone density

Load or weight-bearing activities such as jogging and walking, or lifting light weights, help maintain strong bones that do not fracture easily. Anyone, at any age, can get incredible benefits from walking. Not only is it easy but a group walking together can encourage one another and have lots of fun.

However, please be careful where and when you walk. Do not walk in extreme weather conditions or after dark. Early mornings or late afternoons are good times. Walk at a brisk pace and as far as you can comfortably go — distance is more important than speed. If you are walking at the right tempo you will be able to hold a comfortable conversation without too much effort!

Maintaining and keeping your weight under control

You will find that as you exercise more and become fitter you will either lose some weight or you will find that your body actually looks and feels thinner, lighter and healthier because your muscles have become stronger and well-toned.

Maintaining the right weight will take some of the stress off your back and joints too.