

Exercise for the Elderly: it's never too late to start

By Kate McCarthy, Director of Operations at HomeAid Health Care

George Burns, comedian legend who lived to be 100, used to say, "If I knew I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself!" As more Americans enter their golden years they can begin to identify with Mr. Burns' humor. Most seniors can expect to enjoy a longer life span than previous generations yet longevity without quality of life is a major concern for this growing segment of the population.

Regular exercise has been proved to be a key element to improving quality of life for seniors and the elderly. Besides boosting mood and producing a feeling of well being, the benefits of exercise among this age group include improvements in blood pressure, diabetes, osteoarthritis, osteoporosis and neuro-cognitive function. According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, regular exercise dramatically helps the elderly:

- Fight off infection and sickness by increasing the function of the Immune System. This makes recovery from illness less a strain to the aging body.
- Reduce risk of heart disease and blood pressure by strengthening the Cardio-Respiratory and Cardiovascular functions of the body.
- Increase bone density by curbing the loss of bone mass. This reduces the risk of osteoporosis and broken bones due to falls.
- Promote proper elimination of bodily waste and actively aids digestive health. This aid in the prevention of colon cancer.
- Lower the risk of Alzheimer's disease, dementia and age-related morbidity.
- Aid in the management of high cholesterol and arthritis pain.

If regular exercise protects from chronic diseases, improves moods and lowers chances of injury, why is it that 75% of older Americans do not participate in physical activity? Many elderly claim discomfort or disability as their main reason not to exercise. Some fear injury but most have fallen into the habit of a sedentary lifestyle which they continue as they age. Yet according to a Harvard Alumni study, increases in life expectancy can be gained by people who begin regular exercise even at the age of 75. In fact they tend to outlive those who were physically active earlier in life and later gave up exercising. In other words, it is never too late to start.

According to the American College of Sports Medicine and American Heart Association, there are three areas of physical activity that elder adults should concentrate on.

- **Aerobic Exercise.** Thirty minutes of moderate to intense aerobic activity five days a week will increase the body's cardio respiratory endurance and improve the delivery of oxygen and nutrients to tissues. Aerobic activity includes anything that gets the heart rate up and requires faster breathing such as walking, dancing, jogging, biking or swimming.
- **Strength/Resistance Training.** Strengthen muscles by working on all major muscle groups two to three sessions a week. Strength training builds and tones muscles, prevents loss of bone mass and improves balance. Strength training is done with repetitive motions using light weights, resistance bands or nautilus machines.

- **Stretching/Flexibility Exercises.** Maintaining flexibility and balance is essential to minimizing risk of falls. Stretching to warm up and cool down from exercise reduces muscle soreness. Yoga and Pilates programs develop a strong 'core,' the set of muscles dealing with the stomach, lower back and spine. Tai Chi or Qi Gong exercise uses slow controlled movements which promote balance.

Many seniors may feel that starting an exercise program at their age is beyond their abilities. By starting slowly, elderly exercisers can build up endurance, strength and confidence over time. Those new to exercise should set obtainable goals and chart their exercise activity to keep their program on track until it becomes a habit. Joining an exercise class especially designed for the elderly will help ensure that exercise is done properly, reducing risk of injury. Also participating in a class makes exercise a fun, social event. With long range health as the goal, daily exercise is one thing that the aging can do to ensure their golden years are truly golden.

Sources:

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HomeAid Health Care
Helping Hands at Home

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