

## Seniors Benefit From Physical Fitness

Just because you're getting older doesn't mean that it's too late to get in shape. In fact, research shows that older people who have never exercised can still benefit from physical conditioning. By starting a regular exercise program, you can help prevent coronary artery disease, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, depression and some cancer. Physical fitness reduces the effects of osteoporosis and arthritis — two conditions which can severely limit an older person's lifestyle. Being in good shape physically can help you remain independent as you age and improve the quality of your life.

So how do you get started with a fitness regime if you're older and haven't been active? First, talk to your doctor. While you can begin an exercise program at any age, certain medical conditions such as cardiac problems, lung disease, diabetes, etc., mean that your progress needs to be monitored. Your doctor can help you determine which type of exercise is best for you and give you advice on how to make the most of your exercise program.

### Planning Your Exercise Program

Your program should include aerobic exercise, weight or strength training and exercises for flexibility. Aerobic exercise helps strengthen your heart and helps maintain lung capacity. Aerobic exercise may slow or prevent the buildup of plaque in your arteries and veins (atherosclerosis) and ward off hardening of the arteries by keeping them flexible. Sustained aerobic exercise may help control Type II diabetes by helping your body metabolize sucrose.

Weight or strength training helps strengthen your bones and muscles and may help lower your cholesterol. Weight training improves the strength of your ligaments and tendons so that less stress is placed on your joints.

Tufts University completed two studies on the benefits of strength training. One study showed that older adults with osteoarthritis who participated in a 16-week strength training program were able to decrease their pain by 43 percent while increasing muscle strength. A second study focused on post-menopausal women. After menopause, women can lose up to 2 percent of their bone mass each year. The Tufts study found that women who did progressive strength training two days a week had a 1 percent gain in hip and spine bone density, a 75 percent increase in strength and a 13 percent increase in balance. Improving overall strength and balance through strength training may help reduce the risk for falls and decrease the number of fractures.

Flexibility training or stretching helps you improve the range of motion for your joints. In addition to your wrists, elbows, shoulders, hips, knees and ankles, stretching can help your back. Flexibility exercises can ease stiffness that often is associated with aging. Physical activity may keep arthritic joints from freezing. You should remember that becoming more flexible takes time. Do your stretching slowly and gently at first to prevent injury.

### Getting Started

For many people the easiest way to get started and stay with an exercise program is to join a class, gym or fitness center. Fitness centers may offer certified personal trainers who can help design a program that meets your needs and takes your health conditions into account. Many centers offer special senior classes, nutritional counseling and rehabilitation classes for cardiac patients.