

Why is Exercise so Important?

Some physical weakness may be a part of the aging process; however, functional decline is often the result of a sedentary lifestyle.

According to a study performed by The National Institute on Aging, for the elderly age 75 and older:

- 40% cannot walk two blocks
- 32% cannot climb ten steps
- 22% cannot lift ten pounds
- 7% cannot walk across a small room
- 50% of those who fracture hips never walk independently again, with many dying from complications

These statistics point out that effective fitness is desperately needed to improve the physical health of the frail elderly.

Misconceptions about Exercise and the Elderly

Debilitation can oftentimes be minimized with regular exercise. Common misconceptions about the elderly and fitness can include:

- Frail older adults are unable to exercise.
- It is unwise and unsafe for the frail elderly to begin an exercise program.
- Frail elderly gain few benefits from exercise.
- It is too difficult to set up exercise programs for the frail elderly.

Physiological and Functional Benefits of Exercise for the Elderly

Both research studies and the experiences of the elderly have shown that exercise produces many significant physiological benefits. According to the Office of Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, fitness can be effectively used to achieve the following goals:

- Lessen the degree of disability for the elderly
- Increase muscular strength and endurance which deteriorates through inactivity
- Improve joint flexibility and range of motion
- Strengthen bone mass which is weakened by osteoporosis
- Improve respiratory ability and efficiency
- Relieve some of the painful symptoms of arthritis



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- Improve circulation and reduce high blood pressure
- Reduce the incidence of pressure sores and level of incontinence in the elderly
- Alleviate some of the digestive and bowel function problems that are common among the elderly
- Resistance training has increased strength in the knees and ankles, which can help prevent falls
- Improve the autonomic nervous system's ability to tolerate stress
- Encourage healthy appetites, contributing to nutritional wellbeing
- Enhance the immune system with a 20 percent increase in serum immunoglobulins (this change is very important to the elderly, since susceptibility to illnesses greatly increases with age)
- Help those who suffer from sleeping difficulties, including those with Alzheimer's who suffer from sundowning
- Assist with activities of daily living, such as being able to eat a meal or walk to the washroom

Psychological Benefits of Exercise for the Elderly

- Exercise programs help the elderly to maintain a sense of autonomy over their aging bodies. Instead of feeling like victims to the aging process, they can take control and make progressive steps towards improving their physical health.
- This increased sense of independence also helps to foster self-esteem.
- Cognitive abilities can also be enhanced through fitness. Improving circulation increases the amount of oxygen brought to the brain, enhancing mental alertness.
- Studies have also shown that non-strenuous physical exercise can help the elderly improve memory retrieval and visual-motor performance.
- Exercise has been shown to alleviate frustration, loneliness, and hopelessness by channeling energies into healthy and productive activity.
- Exercise reduces anxiety and tension and fights depression.

Further Proof of the Benefits of Exercise for the Elderly

Researchers at Harvard Medical School tested the hypothesis that physical frailty is partially caused by skeletal-muscle disuse and should therefore be reduced through exercise interventions.

The study involved 100 seniors, including persons with arthritis, lung disease, and dementia. One group of seniors, the control group, participated in normal activities, while the other group participated in resistance training three times a week, using exercise machines to strengthen their thighs and knees.

After a ten-week period, the seniors who underwent resistance training increased their muscle strength by 113 percent, increased their walking speed by 12 percent, and increased their ability to climb stairs by 28 percent. Four seniors who had needed walkers became able to walk with a cane.

Senior Planning Services understands how to incorporate moderate activity and exercise into daily routine as an important part of care. Visit SeniorPlanningServices.com for additional information or call 805-966-3312.

Tips courtesy of US News, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services Office of Aging and the Illinois Council on Long Term Care