

Ask the Expert

Exercise and Aging

If you are like most people you are concerned about diseases and conditions as you age. Most often, the solutions and treatments discussed are the latest drug or surgical procedures. We all know there are risks with surgery and if you have watched a commercial for the drug companies lately you have heard the terrible side effects of most medicines. But the truth is, there are more simple and conservative approaches to preventing or reducing your chances of suffering from these conditions.

What if I told you that you could do a few simple activities each week and reduce your risk for heart attack or stroke? You have no doubt heard lines like this before but what about other issues that almost everyone deals with as they age like stiff joints, back pain, and arthritis? Maybe you have noticed loss of muscle mass or your doctor has told you that you have decreased bone density. Well the good news is that you can reduce your risk and improve these conditions plus many more with one simple thing. EXERCISE!

I talk to people every day that consider "exercise" a bad word. They have no desire to be a body builder or a high level athlete. They often think that you have to spend hours in the gym and have a perfect diet to get any health benefits, but most do not understand how simple it can be. They do not realize how little time they have to spend to get positive health benefits. There are numerous benefits of following a regular exercise program, even for individuals who are challenged by such

conditions as joint pain, back pain, arthritis, or osteoporosis. Exercise has also been shown to be beneficial to people of all ages, as it helps to lower blood pressure, lower the risk of falls and serious injuries (such as hip or wrist fractures), and slows the body's loss of muscle and bone mass. In addition, exercise helps to accomplish the following:

- increase flexibility
- tone muscles
- build stronger bones
- improve mobility and balance
- boost self-image
- relieve insomnia
- relieve tension and stress
- maintain a healthy weight
- enhance cardiovascular fitness
- control appetite
- increase high-density protein (HDL) cholesterol levels ("good" cholesterol)
- reduce the risk of disease (e.g., diabetes)
- provide fun and enjoyment
- help you live a longer, healthier life
- reduce joint & muscle pain

It is never too late to start an exercise program. Coupled with living longer, people are looking for a higher quality of life with greater importance placed on independent, healthy living. Exercise is a great way to keep older people active, but should be approached with caution. Even a walk around the park or 30 minutes working in the garden can be helpful for any age, body and mind. Also, if 30 minutes of exercise at one time seems too much, research suggests that three ten-minute intervals spread out over the day are just as effective.

An exercise program will usually reap benefits for you if you make it a "regular" part of your routine. However, it is very important to check with your doctor before starting an exercise program to ensure that you are healthy enough. A well

rounded exercise program often includes strength training for the muscle system, endurance training for the cardiovascular system, balance exercises, a flexibility routine to promote mobility and last but not least a program for pelvic floor muscles to reduce or eliminate incontinent episodes. Let's break it down.

Strength is the ability of our muscles to generate force for everyday tasks. The ability to lift yourself out of a chair or climb stairs is dependent on the strength of your legs. By age 50 the majority of us will start to lose muscle fiber and by age 80, we will have lost up to 50% of the muscle fiber in our arms and legs. Studies prove that exercise can slow the gradual loss of strength.

Strength training can be free weights, resistance bands, weight machines, weighted balls or even one's own body weight. It is generally recommended to strength train every other day, allowing worked muscles recovery time. Research reports that even people in their 80s can gain strength with just eight weeks of resistance training.

Want to control your weight? Strength training can help control weight by improving metabolism. Muscle burns calories. It can improve bone health as the resistance on the muscle places a healthy stress on the bones to keep bones strong. Muscle strengthening of the pelvic floor can decrease or even eliminate incontinent episodes. Pelvic floor muscle exercises are often recommended as the first line of defense for stress urinary incontinence.

Endurance exercise generally refers to aerobic activity. It is any exercise that causes the

heart and breathing rate to increase. Walking briskly is considered a moderate intensity workout. For the person who is inactive, starting with just 10 minutes is considered beneficial. Walking, jogging, swimming or cycling for 30 minutes a day at a moderate intensity is the US guideline for substantial health benefits. You can lower your blood pressure, risk of heart disease, risk of stroke and even your risk of breast and colon cancer with physical activity.

Most of us are working on a balance activity every time we engage in a walking program. For those with a history of falls, specific balance exercises are best. A balance assessment by a qualified physical therapist will determine where to begin a balance program, be it sitting, standing, stationary or mobile.

Flexibility is especially important as we age. The range of movement of the spinal joints reduces with age and makes us feel stiff. Muscles and tendons lose elasticity making it harder for joints to move. Muscle stretching exercises are recommended on two or more days per week for many people.

Exercise should be a lifelong friend. Research tells us regular exercise can slow the aging process and add years to our life. Exercise benefits our heart, bones, brain, joints, muscle system and even our mood. A study, published in the Archives of Internal Medicine in July 2011, shows that regular exercise can decrease the risk of mental decline and dementia. Knowing all of these benefits should motivate you to get started. If needed ask your physician for a referral to physical therapy or visit the NEA Baptist Clinic Wellness Center.



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