



Seniors and the Importance of Being Fit

BY DAVID GOODMAN AND FRANK ESPOSITO

SENIOR MOMENTS

For much of his adult life, Fred Baum was a self-proclaimed couch potato. He would occasionally walk with his wife when she nagged him enough. Only under great duress, usually upon request from his wife, would he agree to pull out his rusty old 10-speed and take a few laps around his condominium complex on a beautiful spring day.

That's why he was shocked when the new doctor he saw for a checkup several months ago told him that while he was pretty healthy for a 73-year-old man, the medication he needed to take for his blood pressure and cholesterol notwithstanding, he wanted him to start exercising to lower his blood pressure and lose a few pounds.

"My old doctor never told me that. If I've gotten this far without doing any exercise, why should I bother now?" he told the doctor. "Don't you think I'm a little too old to start?"

Not only did the doctor convince him otherwise, he gave him a list of possible activities and a guide on how he should begin a fitness program, some helpful tips, and a list of places in the area that offered exercise classes or where he could find a personal fitness trainer,

WHY START EXERCISING AS A SENIOR?

Although many older people know the importance of physical fitness, it is estimated that about 85% fail to exercise on a regular basis. They don't do it for the same reason younger people don't exercise—it's too hard, it's too boring, or it takes too long to see the results of their effort.

This is a big mistake for a number of reasons. For starters, regular physical activity, in addition to making you look and feel good, lowers risk for a variety of conditions that increase when we age. These include heart disease, diabetes, colon cancer, high blood pressure and obesity. According to one specialist in aging, "Biologically, you can reverse the aging process by 15 to 25 years." This should be sufficient reason in itself, but in addition exercise can maintain your mobility, keep your bones and muscles strong, promote good balance, and combat frailty. Enhancing your fitness will also increase your metabolic rate and burn calories, decrease body fat, improve immune function and promote bone density.

If that's not enough reason to jump on a treadmill or start lifting weights, according to a study conducted at the University of Illinois, recent research shows that reg-

ular exercise can reverse age-related brain decline. There is substantial evidence that aerobic exercise and physical activity can affect such executive-control brain functions as task coordination, planning, goal maintenance, working memory and the ability to switch tasks. Several studies have shown that regular moderate exercise that makes a person breathless increases the speed and sharpness of thought, the actual volume of brain tissue, and the way in which the brain functions. Adults with higher levels of physical fitness had less evidence of deterioration in gray matter (involved in thinking) than less fit peers.

Most seniors, even those who are frail, can and should exercise—once they get the green light from a medical professional. The benefits, after all, far outweigh the risks. A body is just like a car—it needs to be used to keep working properly.

There are several caveats, of course. Start slowly and build. If something hurts, take a break. Make sure you wear loose fitting clothes, keep yourself hydrated and wear comfortable sneakers. If you experience chest pain or pressure, nausea, persistent sharp pain, excessive shortness of breath, or problems with your balance, check immediately with your doctor.

WHAT KIND OF EXERCISE SHOULD I DO?

The areas that are important to consider for staying healthy, active and independent include activities that enhance strength, endurance, balance and flexibility. The most important thing is to seek out activities you enjoy so you won't begin to view working out as a chore. You are more likely to make a commitment to good fitness if you like what you're doing and, if at all possible, you're doing it with people you enjoy being with. This can include any one or a combination of the following activities: using cardiovascular machines (e.g. treadmills, ellipticals, recumbent and upright stationary bikes, step machines), yoga and stretching classes, pilates, gardening, swimming, bicycling, walking, golf, bowling, tennis, dancing and/or martial arts such as Tai Chi.

Aerobic exercise or cardiovascular conditioning is extremely beneficial for seniors. This type of exercise allows the heart and lungs to work out at an elevated rate, supplies oxygen to the muscles, and improves the overall efficiency of the cardiovascular system. For seniors who are frail or have balance problems, swimming and water aerobics may be safer and less jarring to the body.

Weight or resistance training needs to be tailored to meet the medical concerns, overall physical condition and functional capacity of each individual. Resistance can take the form of free weights, machines tubing, or Therabands (or more creative items like soup cans). Form is important, so it is important to start out with someone who can teach you the proper mechanics. Start with lighter and manageable weights and fewer rep-

etitions, and increase over time. Focus on exercising all six major muscle groups.

Studies have shown that even older and frailer people can greatly enhance the quality of their life through exercise. For example, the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services recently completed a study following its implementation of HealthEASE, a coordinated health program that included a 12-week fitness program for seniors. The study found that those who participated in the program reported that their overall health was improved and they experienced fewer sick days.

As for one-time couch potato Fred Baum, he decided to listen to his doctor and joined a senior-focused fitness program at his local YMCA. Now, he swims for 45 minutes three days every week, spends another two days on the treadmill walking for 30 minutes and lifts weights. He's also eating better—adding

vegetables and fruits to his diet — and has lost nearly 10 pounds. His blood pressure has been significantly lowered and his doctor has even taken him off two of his medications. Best of all, he says he has more energy and feels sharper mentally.

"I hadn't exercised regularly for nearly 50 years, but it didn't take me long to make it part of my life," he said. "This spring, I'm looking forward to taking my bike out and pedaling around the neighborhood—without my wife having to light a fire under me."

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