

# Weight Training for Seniors



**J**ust walk!" is the unsolicited advice many young adults give their parents and grandparents to combat the effects of aging. This is excellent advice, but for many older adults it's not that easy. Even the simple act of walking can become difficult.

Being a senior citizen is not a disease or an unfortunate part of life we all go through after retirement. In addition to having a good attitude, keeping your body agile and strong can guarantee a better quality of life. A healthier, more active lifestyle is the closest thing to a fountain of youth.

What does it mean when an older person says, "I still feel young?" Speaking from a physical fitness standpoint, it often means physical strength, which leads to independence and improved quality of life. Strength comes from resistive training.

The other component of overall health is mental status. As children, our parents told us to do something active every time our spirits were down, and they were right. We always felt mentally healthier after some sort of physical activity.

## EFFECTS OF BEING SEDENTARY

In essence, the two major aspects of overall health greatly benefit from becoming more active. But if physical activity has been proven to benefit people over 65, why do many people decide to scale back their physical activity

around this age? It's no coincidence that this is also the time that many older people become more dependent on family members and nursing homes. The inability to get around physically is the reason for much of this dependence.

Seniors lose 10% of their muscle mass each year — simply walking as a form of exercise is not enough to prevent this occurrence. I've evalu-

ated thousands of patients who stated that the majority of their ailments and their overall physical downfall came after retirement.

This is due to the sedentary lifestyle that many people adopt after they're no longer required to report to work. Too much rest and relaxation and not enough physical activity will quickly take its toll on our minds and bodies.

We're more control of the aging process than we're often led to believe. There is no reason why we can't spend the last 20, 30, or even 40 years of our retirement as happy, healthy and active senior citizens.

## PHYSICAL AND MENTAL BENEFITS

Aging is a simple process, but not unbendable. We can turn the tables on aging and prolong its effects for as long as physically possible. Today, we are seeing 80-year-olds running marathons. One of my patients is a 75-year-old retired schoolteacher with osteoporosis who began weight training at age 66. Today, she has the bone density of a 25-year-old man.

The risk of osteoporosis can be drastically reduced by weight bearing exercises. Every few years, our skeleton replenishes itself, and our physical activity level determines the strength of our bones.

It's a commonly taught principle in therapy school that controlled stress on bones stimulates stronger bone growth, thus increasing bone density and reducing the chances of osteoporosis and orthopedic fractures.

That controlled stress is weight-bearing exercise. Medications are not necessary.

It's estimated that of the older patients who suffer hip fractures, 80% die within the first year of the surgical repair. This is mostly due to pneumonia, sepsis (severe body infection from excessive skin breakdown), and cardiovascular failure. Most of these ailments can be easily avoided with post-surgical therapy and strength building.

But the benefits of weight training aren't limited to orthopedic improvements. Physiological gains come mainly from the increased blood flow to organs, especially the brain. Exercise increases blood flow to the brain by 40%.

This increase of nutrient-rich blood flow to the brain has been linked with the prevention of Alzheimer's disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, gout, depression, and many other ailments.

But don't wait until a diagnosis to begin an exercise regimen — disease prevention is the best course of action for long-term health and vitality.

## START TODAY

In addition to a healthy diet, weight training is the best medicine for what society deems "growing old." It's imperative that as we get older, we remain active and take control over our bodies.

Consult your health care professional to structure a safe, progressive resistance training regimen using weights, light dumbbells, resistive bands or weight-bearing exercises. Intersperse weight training with cardiovascular exercise for the best overall result.

So the next time your children or grandchildren nag you to "just walk," encourage them to come with you and begin a healthier lifestyle for generations to come.

Although there are many programs available for senior fitness, it's best to participate in a weight-training program for the best long-term results. ■

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