

## The Fountain of Youth...Exercise

by Eileen Beal

No matter what your age, to age successfully you should be exercising.

“Exercise is the closest thing there is to a fountain of youth,” explains Dr. Robert Palmer, former head of Geriatric Medicine at Cleveland Clinic and author of the book *Age Well!*

Not only will a good (i.e. coordinated) exercise program help improve heart and lung function, it will also help increase muscle tone and strength, physical stamina, and balance. “It may take a few months for people to see a difference, but they *will* see it,” says 81 year old former LPN Elizabeth “Liz” Shelton, who’s been leading daily exercise programs at Fairhill Center on Cleveland’s east side for 18 years.

### It’s never too late

Citing studies done with nursing home residents, Palmer says age is never a reason for not exercising. Indeed, he says, late-in-life programs “dramatically impact health, independence and quality of life.”

However, he added, don’t begin an exercise program without first checking with your physician. And when you do get a green light, start slow, make sure you use the right equipment (especially shoes), and make sure the program includes:

- **Aerobic conditioning:** Aerobic exercise gives arms and legs a continuous, rhythmic workout that promotes heart, lung and circulatory system fitness. In addition, aerobic exercise helps muscles “burn” calories and it lessens the joint pain associated with Arthritis. There is also an increasing amount of research indicating it helps improve brain function, too.
- **Strength training:** Muscle loses strength, flexibility and tone as you age. In strength training (also called resistance training, weight training and pumping iron), you force your muscles to work against some form of resistance: hand weights, leg weights, colorful rubber resistance bands, etc.

Strength training doesn't just strengthen and build muscle, however. Since it puts (good) stress on bones, it helps keep bones strong, too. And, according to *Diabetes and Exercise*, <http://www.dagc.org/managingdia.asp>, it helps improve the way muscles respond to insulin for those with Type 2 diabetes.

- **Stretching and toning:** To help your muscles maintain their tone and help keep joints “juiced,” make sure to incorporate the bending, flexing, stretching, dipping, swooping, and curling moves that come with swimming, Yoga and/or Tai Chi into your exercise program.
- **Balance development:** A growing body of research indicates that

exercises that strengthen leg muscles (i.e. strength training) and help maintain spine and joint flexibility (i.e. stretching and toning) also improve balance and stride. So do “exercises” that have you balancing on one foot while holding on to the back of a chair; consciously using a heel-to-toe step while walking; and moving to-and-fro and side-to-side in line dancing.

## Maximize the benefit

To get the maximum physical benefits from exercise, *don't* exercise to exhaustion and don't overstress joints: doing so can lead to muscle fatigue, dehydration and/or falls.

Do start slowly, and gradually increase frequency and intensity of each exercise activity. And do include elements of all four of the above-cited exercises, but don't do every one every day. To gain the most from strength training and stretching and toning you need to give muscle tissue time to rest, recuperate and revitalize.

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*Eileen Beal is a health writer specializing in issues related to aging and caregiving. “Successful Aging” is provided by the Benjamin Rose Institute, accessible at [www.benrose.org](http://www.benrose.org). The nonprofit social service agency has been assisting older adults and their families since 1908.*

## Sources and Resources

For information on how to get the benefits of exercise at any age, download the following:

*Exercise: A guide from the National Institute on Aging.*

[www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/ExerciseGuide](http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/ExerciseGuide)

*Physical Activity for Everyone*

[www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/recommendations/older\\_adults.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/recommendations/older_adults.htm)