

It's never too late to 'pump iron'

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By Eileen Beal

It's a given: as we age (and especially after we pass our 45th birthday) our muscles begin losing their strength and flexibility—and shrinking and turning to fat-riddled flab. Weaker muscles mean we tend to become less active and less mobile and that, ironically, accelerates the loss of muscle strength and mass, while at the same time worsening the effects of chronic diseases, such as diabetes, osteoporosis and arthritis.

A good strength training program, "whether it's done at home, in front of the TV, or at the local gym doing 'the circuit' machines," can usually slow down muscle strength loss, says Cordell Jones, the therapy program manager at Kethley House at Benjamin Rose Place. Indeed, several studies—including one done by Tufts University in Boston that had 90-year-old nursing home residents walking without canes in just 8 weeks—have shown strength training programs can even restore lost mobility.

So, what's a 'good' program?

One that's been approved by your physician. "They need to know what you are doing so they can monitor things," explains Jones.

One that strains and stretches specific muscle groups—for instance the erector spinae and latissimus muscles supporting the spine, the adductor magnus and gastrocnemius muscles used for climbing stairs, the biceps, triceps and flexor muscles used for carting grandkids hither and yon—against some kind of resistance, says Jones. "Usually the resistance is from lifting barbells or ankle weights or pulling and stretching with elastic bands or working out on resistance machines," says Jones, "but it can also be something as simple as doing arm curls with a[n unopened] can of soup."

And it's a program that's been specifically tailored to the needs, capabilities, and goals of the person who is doing it. "That's because," says Sara Peckham, the Director of Wellness and Resident Life at Judson Retirement Community in University Circle, "each person brings different things—neurological, physical, psychological—into a program with them."

While both men and women can benefit from strength training, they aren't going to see results immediately, says Peckham. That's because first they have to overcome the effects of months or years of de-conditioning and build up muscle mass. And it's also because the muscles are going through a 'healing' process, too. All that lifting, curling, pushing, pulling, and pumping causes small tears in muscle tissue. When the tears heal, however, they cause muscle to become stronger, more flexible and, in most cases, larger.

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Bigger and stronger muscles don't just mean a buffer bod, however, say both Jones and Peckham. Stronger muscles mean better flexibility, balance, and mobility; more efficient burning of calories and elimination of bodily waste; faster healing times when you are ill*; better overall cardiovascular health; and a reduction in the symptoms of many chronic health problems, such as arthritis, osteoporosis, obesity and type 2 diabetes, sleep disorders, and depression.

Strength training tackles depression by helping people build confidence and self-esteem, says 75-year-old Liz Shelton, a former nurse who has been leading the "Yes I Can" exercise group for seniors at Fairhill Center** for 11 years. "When people realize that they can improve their strength and mobility—that getting stronger is doable and that it gets easier as they go along—they start feeling good during a class," she says. "Eventually, that carries over into everything they are doing."

For more information on strength training for older adults, consult the following:

Books

Staying Strong: A senior's guide to a more active and independent life, Lorie A. Schleck

Get Fit While You Sit: Easy workouts from your chair, Charlene Torkelson

Reach For It: A handbook of health, exercise and dance for older adults, David Corbin and Josie Metal-Corbin

Staying Strong: A senior's guide to a more active and independent life, Lorie A. Schleck

Strong Women Stay Young, Dr. Miriam Nelson

Strength Training Past 50, Wayne Wescott and Thomas Baechle

Websites:

Active Living Coalition of Canada's Physical Activity Guide

www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hppb/fitness/downloads.html

Exercise: A guide from the National Institute on Aging (free)

www.nia.nih.gov/exercisebook/intro.htm or call 800-222-2225

National Institutes of Health's Exercise for Older Adults

<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/exercise/toc.html>

Growing Older, Staying Strong

www.ilcusa.org/news/pubnes.htm

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Medline Plus's Exercise for Seniors

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlinesplus/exerciseforseniors.html

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* When you are sick, the body uses protein faster than usual, and it pulls much of that protein from muscles. Consequently, the more muscle mass you have the faster and better you'll heal.

** Formerly Fairhill Center for Aging. They changed their name in 1998.