

HEALTH & WELLNESS

The ball's in your court: Taking a closer look at the benefits of exercise



By Carol Edwards

Want to have fun, feel great, have more energy and live longer? Look no further than regular exercise and, of course, sex—if you're fortunate enough to have a willing and active partner. The health benefits of regular exercise and physical activity are definitely hard to ignore.

Simply put, exercise helps manage weight, prevents disease, boosts endurance and strengthens muscles by delivering oxygen and nutrients to your tissues. It's also been shown to improve mood, increase energy, reduce stress and promote better sleep. Physical activity can even put the spark back in your love life! Need I say more?

What's going on as we age?

While it's clear that exercise is good for everyone, it's important to examine its role in keeping us independent and mobile. Coupled with reducing the potential for osteoporosis, heart disease and a higher body mass index, the value of regular exercise becomes even greater later in life.

Many of us are nursing medical conditions that affect our ability to move freely, manage daily activities and endure standing, sitting or walking for extended periods of time. It could be a nagging knee problem from our days on the ski slopes that slows us down or back pain from a fall off a ladder. But chances are, some of our aches and pains are from plain old wear and tear. Let's take a closer look at a few of the more common conditions that can affect us, along with their risk factors and tips for prevention and treatment.

1. Osteoporosis

Bone is a living tissue that is constantly being absorbed and replaced. Osteoporosis occurs when the replacement of new bone fails to keep pace with the removal of old bone. It causes bones to become brittle—so fragile, in fact, that a fall or even mild stress such as bending over or coughing can cause a fracture. These fractures most commonly occur at the hip, wrist or spine.

Who is at risk?

A number of factors, including age, sex, race, family history and frame size, can influence your likelihood of developing osteoporosis. While this disorder affects people of all races, white and Asian women, especially those who are postmenopausal, are at significantly higher risk than others. Osteoporosis has also been associated with the side effects of medications used to combat or prevent seizures, depression, gastric reflux, cancer and transplant rejection.

What you can do?

Women aged 50 years and older with the above-mentioned risk factors should have an annual bone-density test. Large doses of calcium and vitamin D doses can be taken both preventatively and as treatment. Once diagnosed, a bisphosphonate such as alendronate or risendronate may be prescribed. These medications and dietary supplements, along with weight-

Safety precautions

- Consult your family doctor before you begin.
- Allow 48 hours between strength-training sessions for muscle recovery.
- Make sure ankles and feet are supported by proper footwear.
- Stop if you feel pain, exhaustion, or are having trouble breathing.
- Learn the proper technique.
- Drink plenty of water.

bearing exercise, can help strengthen bones. Lifestyle changes may also be beneficial, such as avoiding alcohol and smoking, and reducing the use of steroids if possible.

2. Heart problems

Coronary heart disease, hypertension, valve disease and rhythm disorders all become increasingly common with age, and can affect both the quality and length of life. The heart undergoes subtle physiological changes over the years. It doesn't pump as effectively as it once did and its muscles relax less completely between heartbeats. The ventricles become stiffer and the artery walls begin to lose elasticity, too. An aging heart doesn't increase its contractions as easily to get blood out to the muscles and supply them with oxygen during exercise, and also becomes less responsive to adrenaline.

Who is at risk?

Men older than 55 years and postmenopausal women are at the highest risk of heart disease. Chest pains, fatigue, shortness of breath and fainting are common symptoms of vascular problems. High blood pressure and its associated complications, such as stroke, kidney disease, heart attack and heart failure, are all serious concerns as well.

What you can do?

Regular blood pressure measurements should be taken by your family doctor and high levels (generally defined as 160/90 mm Hg and above) should be treated. Lowering elevated blood pressure has been proven to save lives. Even partial treatment can lower the rate of potentially serious complications. For those with no other heart diseases, a change in diet, moderate exercise and gentle weight loss may be sufficient to lower blood pressure and reduce its associated risks.

3. Weight gain

As we age, we often become more inactive. In addition, we lose muscle cells because they cannot readily repair themselves. This means our muscles literally shrink. Metabolism—the bodily function that turns calories into energy—naturally slows down, causing weight gain. We might be eating the same amount of food but our bodies burn less energy and store more calories as fat, especially around the stomach. Ailments can also

More reasons to get active

- Remaining active reduces the risk of heart disease, osteoporosis, stroke and adult-onset diabetes.
- Regular physical activity will improve your posture and balance, strengthen your muscles and bones, and enhance your overall quality of life.
- Inactivity can lead to a decline in bone and muscle strength, heart and lung fitness, and flexibility.
- Inactivity is as harmful to your health as smoking.

restrict the amount of exercise we can handle, so we start leading more sedentary lifestyles.

Who is at risk?

People with a body mass index of more than 30 kg/m² are considered obese. Diabetes, heart disease and certain kinds of cancer are associated with belly fat. Osteoarthritis, hypertension, constipation and pulmonary complications can also be caused by being overweight or obese. The added strain on the heart, lungs and vascular system that comes with carrying extra weight is the biggest concern. Studies have also shown that a higher body mass index is, at times, associated with cognitive decline.

Prevention and treatment

Ongoing exercise, such as strength training and yoga, can help increase and strengthen muscle cells. It can also improve bone density and cardiorespiratory fitness, and speed up your metabolism.

Getting back to basics

Keep active and moving, and remember to wear sensible shoes. Aim for 30 minutes of exercise a day, which should include cardiovascular activities, balance training and stretching. Brisk walks or swimming may be better choices if you have knee or joint pain.

If you're unsure of how to start your fitness program, talk to your doctor, a registered exercise professional or physiotherapist. Exercise at all stages of life will improve your health, longevity and quality of life—so get moving. You'll be glad you did, and so might your partner! ●



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