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# Fitness Over Fifty: How Not to Look Your Age

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# Fitness Over Fifty: How Not to Look Your Age

## **Be a Fabulously Fit Fifty**

At fifty, many of us take stock of our lives. We can look back on careers, friends, and family that we are proud of, but what do we want to do with our middle years? How can we make the most of our lives? Perhaps the most overlooked aspect of our later years, as well as the one that may have the greatest impact on our overall well-being, is our health and fitness. How, then, can we best ensure our health and fitness into our mid and later years? Exercise!

Exercise can help slow down the onset of the symptoms of aging. The health benefits of a good exercise program are numerous. Exercise helps maintain muscle strength and joint flexibility. In addition, the stress put on our bones through exercise help maintain their strength and integrity. Even our mood can be improved by staying healthy—researchers have discovered a link between exercise and a decrease in depression and anxiety. This may be due to the increase in energy and the improved sleeping patterns among fit fifty year olds.

Of course, nothing beats exercise for battling weight gain and getting our body into the kind of shape that can still turn heads as we walk down the street. Besides that, our blood pressure tends to drop, lowering the chance of heart disease. Even our immune system gets a boost from regular exercise. Believe it or not, physical activity has even been linked to improved mental function!

Before starting to exercise, it helps to create a list (write it down!) of the reasons you'd like to become or stay fit. Think of the advantages of living a longer and a more active life. Referring to these sources of motivation can help you stick to an exercise program.

Set aside time each day for exercise. Doctors say that health benefits increase measurably with as little as 30 minutes of exercise 5 times each week. Of course, the more we work out, the greater the benefits. We encourage you to increase the length and duration of each day's workout.

Pick activities that appeal to you. From walking, running or cycling, to push-ups and sit-ups to actual weight lifting, at home or at the gym, each form of exercise has its own benefits to keeping you fit and strong.

Make sure and start each day's exercise with stretching and a warm up period. This will reduce the discomfort to the joints and muscles after the exercises are done. It will also prevent more serious muscle injury. Similarly, after a workout, make sure and take the time to stretch and cool down. This too, will help the body recover from the exercise session.

Don't overload yourself early on, and make sure to know your limits and not push the body too hard. Avoid using joints and muscles that are experiencing pain. Starting off too ambitiously may result in a strong desire to quit working out altogether. It's much better to begin slowly and ease yourself into the exercise program. After your body has adjusted to the higher activity level, you'll be able to increase the intensity and duration of the workout.

Of course, not all exercise needs to be work, dancing, yard work, sports, and dips in the local pool can all be a part of an active, healthy life.

In addition, it may help to combine exercise with activities you enjoy. Walking, running, or biking with friends and family can be far more enjoyable than exercising alone. Treadmills, stair-steppers, weights, and exercise mats can be placed and used in front of the television during the morning or evening news as well as during your favorite television programs.

Examining your diet can also be helpful. Diets high in fruits and vegetables will not only aid in overall health, but can provide an increase in energy that will allow you to do more with each day.

How you decide to stay fit and healthy is up to you. At home or at the gym, on a bicycle or in a pool, many fun and enjoyable alternatives for a healthy life exist. While you consider how to make the most of your middle years, getting or staying fit and healthy may be the most important thing you can do. Don't wait! Fifty is a great age to focus on getting and staying fabulously fit.

### **Exercise for Elders – Choosing the Right Activity for You**

The idea of exercise being a beneficial part of a healthy life has been around for some time, but only recently has that advice been offered to the aging population as well as the young population. In recent times, information has been presented to demonstrate that exercise is helpful to people of all ages and people with many different health needs. Creating and sticking with an exercise routine can help to stop or prevent a number of different health problems. Moreover, even a little exercise or activity can help aging seniors manage their health conditions. Seniors require four different types of exercise to stay healthy.

Strength exercises help to tone and build muscle tissue which in turn can help metabolic rates. Balance exercises help to build strength in the legs which can assist with the prevention of falls and other loss of balance issues. This can prevent a number of disabling injuries for seniors. Stretching exercises help to maintain the range of flexibility which can lead to a more active lifestyle. Endurance exercises raise the heart rate and breathing for a long period of time. Activities like jogging, walking, and swimming fit in this category. The most important part of incorporating exercise into life is choosing the right activity for you.

When you decide to begin choosing the appropriate exercise program for yourself, you must decide what you like to do best. If you have a personality type who enjoys the company of others in a team atmosphere, choose a team sport at a health club. If you prefer to be alone while exercising, consider solitary activities you might enjoy. You may love walking and hiking, but hate jogging. You may hate swimming but love biking. The important thing to remember is that any type of exercise can be tailored to fit your needs.

If, in your younger days, you enjoyed riding a bicycle, but you can't get on a bike now, consider purchasing a recumbent bike and watching movies while you exercise. The most important

thing to remember is just to engage in the activity you enjoy as often as possible. You could follow the same routine each day or vary it from day to day. You may decide to ride a stationary bike for fifteen minutes then engage in some gardening for a while. This variation not only ensures that you are meeting all of your exercise needs; it also makes the process more interesting.

A gym facility is a good idea for folks who enjoy working out with other people is a social atmosphere. It is, however, not necessary. If you are unable to afford it, don't wait until you have the money to join a health club to begin exercise. Working out should not necessarily involve high priced clothing or toys. Exercise, at its very core, involves simple self-discipline.

Walking is a good choice for most people for a number of reasons. One reason it is so popular is that it requires little in the way of preparation. No gadgets or expensive clothing are required. A sturdy pair of walking shoes will take you a long way to meeting your exercise goals. If you decide to shop for walking shoes, do it at the end of the day when your feet are at their largest. You should also try them on and test them out in the store before you purchase them. If they feel uncomfortable in the store, don't take them home with the belief that you'll get used to them. It will only increase your level of soreness.

Additionally, there is a very low risk of injury associated with walking. It is relatively harmless on the joints as one foot is always on the ground. Therefore, when the other foot strikes the ground, it carries little more than a person's total body weight with it. Another benefit to walking is that it can be done anywhere. You can walk in the comfort of a shopping mall, a local high school track, or a nature trail. Wherever you decide to walk, though, be sure you have your personal safety in mind. Walking can reduce stress by refreshing your brain and increasing your energy level. If you decide to walk, try to walk at a pace you can maintain for the entirety of the walk. Slow down if you feel any type of pain or any shortness of breath.

Whatever exercise program you choose, be sure to include a warm up period and a cool down session in your exercise routine. Stretching your arms and legs will increase your level of flexibility and decrease your level of soreness.

### **The Senior Stretch – Warming Up Before Starting Your Day**

Perhaps no aspect of senior fitness is overlooked as often as stretching. Stretching in the morning may be the best way to make the most of every day. Regular morning stretches help maintain overall flexibility, which, in turn, affects the rest of our lives. Stretching prevents every day injuries and allows our muscles to perform at their maximum potential. In addition, stretching is simple, requiring no additional equipment or physical skills, and demanding only a little bit of time.

Like a good tune up for an automobile, daily stretching, especially in the morning, helps work out any "kinks" in your body. Also, stretching in the morning prevents those "kinks" from happening to begin with. Muscle and back pain, for example, can be both alleviated and prevented by a good program of daily stretching.

In addition, stretching prepares your body for the rest of the day. Balance and coordination are improved and flexibility is increased. The body's range of motion and ease of movement are heightened, and muscles are prepared for activity. The mind, too, benefits from the relaxation, peace, and calm that is induced through just 10-15 minutes of stretching each morning. Mental and physical tension, as well as anxiety and blood pressure can be reduced through focusing on the muscles as you stretch in the morning.

Although you don't have to be an expert in order to stretch, there are some important guidelines that will help you make the most of a morning stretching session. If you don't have any experience with stretching, several dozen books and online resources exist to show you how. Many of these include pictures as well as text. Similar books and websites cover other stretching methods such as yoga.

No matter what method you choose, make sure and listen to your muscles during stretching. As you execute each stretch, push yourself to the point where the muscle feels strained, but not in pain. When you reach the point where the muscle feels tight, hold the position for 10-15 seconds until the muscle loosens, then stretch a little further. In this manner, you can increase your range of motion without experiencing discomfort or pain. While stretching, avoid the impulse to bounce, pushing the muscle past the point of tolerance momentarily. Bouncing may allow you to stretch a little further, but it greatly increases the chance of injury.

For maximum benefits, physical fitness experts recommend stretching uniformly, meaning that each stretch on one side of the body (your right leg, for example), should be matched by a stretch on the other side (your left leg). In addition, make sure to stretch complimentary muscles—if you stretch the muscle on the front of your leg (called the quadriceps), stretch the complimentary muscle on the back of your leg (the hamstring).

Initially, you may not be able to move through a wide range of motion. Don't let this frustrate you. Each day you will find yourself able to stretch a little further, and the stretching will become less stressful and more enjoyable. Muscles that have not been stretched in a long time (years, for some of us) take time to regain their flexibility. Hang in there! The benefits of a flexible body far outweigh the time and discomfort you may go through when you start stretching daily.

Make sure you keep yourself in the habit of stretching each day. Skipping a few morning sessions will result in muscles tightening back up. Try and create a schedule (10-15 minutes per day) and stick to it. If you can manage to keep up with regular morning stretching, you will feel the benefits in no time.

We can do many things to aid us in maintaining a fit and healthy lifestyle. No matter what you choose to do, begin each day with a stretching session. Few activities are as simple, requiring no special equipment or expertise. Your body will feel and respond better and will be able to perform to its highest potential. Injuries, aches, and muscle strain can be avoided, and the rest of the day's physical activity will be greatly aided by starting off your day with a good stretch. Most importantly, after you have established a habit of stretching each morning, you will feel great. So warm up before you start each day. Stretch!

## **Flex Schedules for Seniors – A Guide to Stretching**

Few things reward the body as much as stretching. At the same time, almost nothing could be simpler or take less time. Unfortunately, most Americans, including seniors, overlook stretching as part of an every day fitness program.

Stretching increases muscle flexibility. This can result in a decreased likelihood of injury, better muscle performance, and a feeling of well-being that follows for hours after you've finished.

Ideally, you should stretch several times each day. Stretching in the morning will get your body ready for the activities ahead. It also provides your mind with a focused, quiet activity that results, for many people, in a sense of peace and lessening of anxiety. In the evening, stretching will help work out the kinks of a day's wear and tear. Stretching and relaxing muscles before going to bed will reduce soreness after a hard day and will have you waking up feeling great.

Before any strenuous physical activity, stretching is an absolute must. Warming up the body beforehand will prevent injury and reduce post-activity soreness. In addition, stretching can be performed at a stoplight, during a lunch break, or any other time.

10-15 minutes is plenty of time for the morning, evening, or pre-activity stretch. The following stretches provide just an example of what a "flex schedule" might look like. Plenty of books and online resources are available that cover this topic in detail.

The most basic stretches can be performed while seated. Start with your neck. Look down at your stomach. Then slowly roll your head to the left, then back (so you're looking at the ceiling), to the right, and back down. You should feel the muscles in your neck stretching. A similar motion can be performed with the wrists. While seated, simply move your closed hand in a circle using your wrist. Then lift each leg, and draw the same circle with the feet around the ankle. Make 3-5 such circles in the clock-wise direction and then the counter-clockwise direction with your neck, both wrists and both ankles.

Next, let's move to the calf muscle. Find a wall, chair, stability ball, or something that you can safely lean on. While leaning comfortably against the object, move your right foot two feet back. Slowly bend your left knee so that your right ankle flexes. You should feel the muscle in the back of your lower right leg being stretched. Hold the stretch for 30 seconds and release. Repeat the exercise with your left calf.

The best way to stretch the front of the upper leg (the quadriceps) is to lie down on a flat surface (floor, bed, mat, et cetera). While lying on your left side, with your left elbow on the surface, and your left hand supporting your head, pull your right foot up behind you, so that the knee is bent as far as possible. Reach back with your right hand and grab onto your right foot. Pull you foot towards your back until you feel the muscle stretching. Hold this stretch for 30 seconds. Perform the same stretch for your right leg.

Stay on the ground for the next stretch, which will be the complimentary muscle in the back of the leg (the hamstring). Lie on your back and lift your right leg into the air with the knee slightly bent. Reach up and hold the back of the right calf, pulling it toward you until you feel

the muscle in the back of the leg stretching. Hold this stretch for 30 seconds. Perform the same stretch for you left leg.

Next stand up with your feet shoulder-width apart. Put your hands on your hips, and move your pelvis in a circle: forward, left, back, then right. Perform this circle 3-5 times clockwise and 3-5 counter-clockwise.

Keeping your feet in place and your left hand on your left hip, you will then reach up toward the ceiling with your right hand. Slowly bend your upper body to the left, reaching with your right arm over your head and toward the wall to your left. You should feel a muscle on the right side of your stomach stretching. Hold this stretch for 30 seconds. Perform the same stretch to your left.

For a basic shoulder stretch, clasp your hands behind your back and slowly lift them upwards. You'll feel the muscles in your shoulder stretching. Hold this stretch for 30 seconds.

Now you're stretched from head to toe. Countless other stretches exist, but this schedule gives you a basic routine. Consult with your doctor and, if possible, a physical trainer to fine tune a "flex schedule" that's right for you.

## **Increasing Senior Stamina**

Exercise for seniors is increasingly important. It can lead to a longer life span, prevent a number of medical conditions, and help seniors feel better. However, in order for a sedentary individual to start and stick with an exercise program, an increase in stamina is essential. There are several things you can do to increase your stamina.

Start your exercise program by getting a physical. There are a number of things that can change the way you exercise, so it's a good idea to know if a change in health is being caused by your exercise program or by other health concerns. Good exercise programs are comprised of three factors: frequency, intensity, and duration. If you get too much of any of these, your entire exercise program is in jeopardy.

Check with your doctor to decide how much of any of these components is too much for you. Don't move too quickly once you have started. If your goal is to work up to walking for twenty minutes each day, and you've decided to start with five, don't move from five to twenty in the course of one day. Your muscles need time to acclimate to the new level of activity.

Work with your current health issues. If you've had a hip replacement, marathons probably aren't going to be the best exercise goal for you. Talk to your doctor to decide what works well with your health issues. Choose activities that you like. Forcing yourself to engage in an activity repeatedly isn't going to do anyone, especially you, any good. Your workout routine should include at least one activity that you can engage in anywhere.

If you have to travel for business, or you go on vacation, it will be easier to keep that activity up, thereby increasing your stamina. Find an exercise buddy or join an organization that

promotes your exercise activity. You're more likely to stick with it if you have people to help motivate you. Keeping some type of record of your performance might help you keep track of where you are and where you should be. Plan long term goals carefully, for example, if your fitness goal is to go on a three day nature hike, allow your body to acclimate to the conditions you will be experiencing. Prevent injury at all costs.

If you feel a bit sore from your last workout, it might be best to take it easy during your next workout. Be sure to include a warm up and cool down period in your daily routine. This will not only improve your flexibility, it might also help prevent injury. Be sure to rest frequently. If you need to engage in two fifteen minute sessions instead of one thirty minute session, do it. Fatigue may make you quit your exercise program, and then you could lose that stamina you've been building.

Unless your doctor recommends them, don't bother with dietary supplements. Your diet should supply your nutrients, not the health food store. Weight training can help with all aspects of your exercise program. Target the muscle groups you use most. Choose your diet carefully. Eating too many empty calories can only lead to added weight, which won't help at all with your workout. Be sure to prevent dehydration.

During an exercise session, heat is built up in the muscle groups of focus which causes the body temperature to increase. The body tries to cool itself by sweating. The sweat evaporates from the skin, and it is that process that assists in supporting a lower core body temperature. Sometimes, though, this process isn't an adequate way of cooling, due to factors like moisture and humidity. As a result, the bodies continue to sweat, causing further fluid loss. The only way to replace this fluid loss is to drink more fluid. Prevention of this entire process by consuming enough liquid both during your workout and during the normal course of your day will go miles in improving your stamina.

Learn to manage your stress. If you spend all of your energy during the day dealing with stress, you won't have any left for your workout. One final way to work on stamina is through your favorite music. Music can be very helpful in keeping you motivated during a workout. The more motivation you have, the more likely you are to stick with your program, which will increase stamina.

### **Seniors that Can Walk the Walk and Talk the Talk**

Walking is one of the most popular activities for seniors. Whenever you see seniors walking in your neighborhood on a regular basis, trudging along whether it is a perfect day or not, it motivates you in your own activity and inspires you to become a healthy senior yourself. Fit seniors are one of the best role models for all who are young. Growing older does not seem as daunting when a senior can portray their independence by keeping motivated. After just a week of staying on a walking schedule, you may feel that you too can be an example to other people and seniors and that you can talk the healthy lifestyle talk.

Any senior who is not out there, staying in the fresh air and keeping themselves moving, seems to be missing out on one of the staples of the senior lifestyle and life in general. Walking keeps

the mind fresh and all of the organs and limbs working. Even if a senior needs assistance to walk, or is in a wheel chair, they seem happier and healthier when they continue to get out and let their body join with the liveliness of the outdoors. As a senior, you can become one of the lively walkers that live life to the fullest and are free to brag that they are keeping active despite the number that represents the years they have lived.

A little motivation and realization of how much a brisk walk can improve your mood; can help get you on the walking trail to a fitter self. Your heart and mind will benefit greatly from a 30 to 40 minute walk, three times a week. You will be able to think clearer and breathe better. You can also cut down on chances of chronic disease by getting the blood moving through your body. Walking seniors are the healthy envy of the neighborhood because they are living life to a fuller extent than those of us sitting in the blue light of our television sets. If you let your doctor know that you want to start walking, which is a good idea, 99% of the time they will be encouraged that you are taking your wellness seriously. Walkers eat, sleep and move better and you can be one of them with a simple opening of the door.

To become one of the walking seniors that you admire, make sure you have a pair of shoes that are comfortable for you. This should mean that they are the type of shoe that you could wear for several hours without feeling like you desperately want to change into a different pair. Also, wearing a few layers is a good idea, so you can warm up gradually and cool down the same way. Knowing the area that you want to walk in is also a good idea. Neighbors tend to look out for each other, so preferably, you will start taking walks around your own neighborhood; but if that is not possible, try a mall or a public park. It is never too late to join the groups of walkers that are daily parading through the malls as soon as they open.

If you find it difficult to get into a routine of walking every day or every other day, see if you can find a friend or family member to walk with you. Remember, someone who knows you, especially if they are somewhat younger, will be encouraged by your motivation and healthy idea. Show them that you are doing what you can to stay healthy and that walking will be great for both of you to share. A good partner will allow you to enjoy one of the other great benefits of walking, which is talking.

A walking partner will help keep up your pace, and will provide the conversation to take your mind off your exertion. Keep in mind, that a faster or challenging pace should be worked up to for awhile before going any further. There is no reason to not enjoy the soothing effects of a gentle walk until you build up your speed. You can still talk the talk even if you are keeping your pace below a low roar.

### **Aerobic Exercise for the Couch Potato**

If the thought of bouncing around a gym or workout center in spandex makes you cringe, take heart. Experts in aerobic exercise say that you can reap the benefits of an aerobic workout without getting up off your butt.

Chair aerobics are designed to give those with mobility problems a good cardio workout without putting strain on the joints and bones. A chair aerobics session may include kicks, punches and

stretches, and often includes the use of workout bands and weights to increase strength and resistance training as the workouts get more intense.

Sitting down to exercise may sound silly – but the workouts are real and so are the benefits for your cardiovascular system – and the rest of your body. There are chair workouts designed for just about everyone – including inconspicuous workouts for those in offices who don't want to attract a lot of attention. Generally, a chair aerobics workout starts with ten minutes of stretching and warming up, then moves into an aerobics phase that may include punching the air and doing scissor kicks in your chair before moving into a series of weight lifting and finally into a cool down phase.

Mary Ann Wilson, whose television fitness show “Sit and Be Fit” airs on PBS stations across the country, says, “Our purpose is to keep people functionally fit as long as possible.” To help do this, Wilson leads 30 and 60 minute aerobics workout programs aimed at those who may be mobility impaired. She focuses her workouts on movements that support and strengthen muscles needed for everyday functional movements, including posture control, stretches for flexibility and light weight lifting to build and maintain strength in muscles and joints.

Wilson has been producing her show since 1987, and she attributes its popularity to the fact that chair aerobics is easy, convenient and inexpensive. There's no expensive equipment needed – soup cans or filled cups work just fine as weights. Couch potatoes don't need to leave home, and seniors don't have to worry about losing their balance and falling.

For an easy workout, you can try some simple stretches and punches. Sitting in a comfortable, stable chair, pump your arms in the air overhead five times each, then five times together. Next, punch across your body, alternating arms to the count of twenty. Get your lower body into the action with some toe-tapping and heel lifts, then add in two to three minutes of seated 'jogging' – just lift your feet and cycle in your chair. Altogether, the workout takes about ten minutes. Do it two to three times a day and you'll be hitting the recommended 30 minutes of activity without ever getting off your bottom.

Chair aerobics appeals to those who have limited mobility, or who have been told that weight bearing and high impact aerobics are out of the question because of arthritis or other joint problems. Motions as simple as neck rolls can be good for your heart, say one fitness instructor. For those who want a tougher workout, there's an office chair workout that includes pushing and pulling yourself away from the desk and doing leg lifts while seated in your chair.

What are the benefits? Better heart function, lower blood pressure, increased circulation and heightened alertness, say the experts. Exercise doesn't have to mean going out and jogging or working out at the gym. The whole idea is to get your body moving and your heart pumping – and chair aerobics does that as well as anything else. It's the perfect solution if you can't leave your desk or if you work at home and can't get to the gym. It's also an excellent solution for older Americans who may not be as mobile as they once were, but who can benefit from regular exercise.

Teresa Reyman, who teaches a class in chair aerobics at a Maryland senior center, offers these tips for seniors who exercise.

Pay attention to posture, whether you're sitting or standing. Proper posture helps prevent osteoporosis by keeping muscles and joints strong enough to support the bones.

Exercise with a group. It's more fun, so you're more likely to stick with it, and the social benefits are important for senior citizens.

Make exercise a lifestyle change. Find an activity that you like and stick with it. It's the best thing you can do to improve your health and your quality of life.

## **Low Impact Exercise Makes a Huge Impact on Seniors**

It is clear that exercise for seniors is increasingly important. Exercise has a number of benefits. Even people who are feeling like they are too old or too feeble can begin to feel better about their outlook on life through exercise. Regular workouts can improve many health conditions that have been already diagnosed. Moreover, staying active can prevent diseases like diabetes. However, many seniors can't cope with difficult exercises. Low impact exercises can provide just as many health benefits for seniors as other types of exercise can.

As with any exercise program, there are several reasons one might one to check with a doctor before beginning the regimen. If you have a chronic disease, chest pain, breathing problems, fever, or joint issues, it is an excellent idea to consult with a doctor before starting any new activity.

One form of low impact exercise is yoga. Yoga can ease the symptoms of arthritis and improve your mood. It is wonderful for improving flexibility as well. Yoga is defined as "to join together." It joins the mind and body through movement, breathing, and mediation. A yoga routine includes a series of poses, or asanas. There are lots of popular forms of yoga, but in the United States, the most popular for is hatha yoga. This type improves balance and strength through physical motion and breathing exercises.

Other forms of yoga can offer a more physically demanding workout or a more mentally demanding workout. A yoga class is perhaps the best way to get started with this type of exercise. Once you understand the basics, it is possible to practice yoga anywhere, even on vacation. Yoga is a fairly safe exercise, but remembers, go slowly.

Another form of low impact exercise is mall walking. There are a several beneficial aspects to mall walking. Indoor shopping malls are not subject to the weather. It is possible to enjoy weather related comfort in a mall without the nastier aspects like precipitation, wind, or temperature. Additionally, malls are safe places. Security personnel are employed to ensure the safety of patrons. Also, automobile traffic is not an issue in malls which means that busy intersections aren't a problem, and neither are automobile fumes. Moreover, malls are also typically trash free so you don't have to worry about running into that issue in your path.

Further, facilities and water are always nearby. Lots of malls have clubs, price reductions, and health screenings to encourage the practice of mall walking. Some offer rewards programs for walkers. Mall walking can also encourage friendships. Talking with other walkers is easy and

fun. The pace is slow and easy going in mall walking, so it makes an excellent low impact exercise.

Water workouts are perhaps the most popular form of low impact exercise. Water exercise can help with posture, balance, and flexibility, build muscle, reduce the risk of heat stroke during a workout, increase your range of motion, and prevent falls. There are a number of toys to include that can make your workout more fun or more challenging. Kickboards, foam weights, balls, and noodles can add spice to any water workout. When deciding where to workout, consider several factors. If you have a backyard pool, it will work, but it is probably more subject to the weather than an indoor heated pool. Also, heated pools offer relief for arthritic joints. Water aerobics programs vary from beginner levels to advanced levels.

In beginning programs, you will learn to combine arm and leg movements in lots of different ways. More advanced programs incorporate tougher routines. Most classes are taught by a certified instructor, and some are taught in conjunction with music. The course can be taught in waist or chest deep water depending on your level of advancement. Because water provides more support for your body, you are less likely to experience pain following a workout. It can, however, be costly, as it will probably require joining a club and paying membership fees. In order to be safe during aquatic exercise, be sure to consult a doctor before starting. Also, be sure you never workout alone. Even the best swimmers sometimes need assistance. Be aware of water depth before you jump in. Jumping in shallow water can cause spinal cord injuries. If you choose to workout outdoors, be sure to include sunscreen as a part of your routine.

### **Get Real – Savvy Seniors Say Swim for Life**

There are a vast array of reasons why swimming and water based exercises may be the best choices for seniors. Next to walking, water based exercises have the lowest impact rate for injuries. Water also provides more options for those who are extremely lacking in general fitness or have a previous injury that makes land based activity difficult. Finally, water based activities work the entire body, serving as a form of both strength training even as aerobic training takes place.

Swimming, of course, uses almost all the major muscle groups at the same time, giving a total body work out. Swimming as an activity also places a vigorous demand on your heart and lungs. Because of the resistance of the water, swimming develops both muscle strength and endurance, as well as helps increase flexibility. Because of its multitude of effects, swimming provides almost all of the aerobic benefits of running even as it yields many of the benefits of resistance training thrown in. Because swimming does not put the strain on connective tissues that running, aerobics and some weight-training regimens do, swimming is the kind of low-impact work out that is perfect for seniors seeking to regain or maintain their fitness.

Swimming as a method for increasing fitness is rapidly gaining popularity. In particular the sport is exceedingly gentle to those who are physically challenged. The buoyancy factor of water makes swimming the most injury-free exercise available. Therefore it is particularly appealing to seniors, especially those with any type of joint issues. In water, a person's body weight is reduced by 90% as compared to its weight on land. A 220 pound man will normally weigh

about 22 pounds if he is standing in chin deep water. Exercises in water can also be done more often because of the low incidence of injuries and it is more effective for exercising the entire body as any movement in water 12 times greater resistance than movement in air. For the elderly, water fitness is safe, fills the need for exercise, increases a body's range of motion and is a low-impact exercise.

A critical factor in the positive effects of swimming is the resting heart rate in water decreases 10 beats per minute while the maximum heart rate decreases by 10 to 30 beats. Though the heart pumps just as much blood as in other exercise, it pumps it more slowly when swimming. The generally lower water temperature and reduced pull of gravity in water may be the cause for this reduction, but experts are quite sure. In any case, swimming strengthens the cardiovascular system, improves the bodies' use of oxygen, all as the heart is able to work less strenuously.

Other forms of water exercise are also excellent for overweight people as the buoyancy of the water takes strain off the joints making exercise easier and more effective. With one such form, Aquatics, both the water and the exercise routine serve to help increase a participant's fitness level. A one-hour class generally includes 50 minutes of water-based exercise as well as warm-up and cool-down exercises. Among the noted benefits is that warm water helps limber up joints and ease the pain of arthritic joints.

For Aquatics, the water must be kept at 83 degrees or warmer, with 87 degrees considered ideal. Because the water supports a person's weight and takes the pressure off joints, those who exercise through Aquatics suffer from fewer aches and pains after exercising. The buoyant effect of the water also allows for easier movement as participants move through their routine. Finally, the water offers resistance, allowing exercisers a form of strength training that does not put any weight or additional stress on the participant's joints.

Exercising in a pool essentially removes the effects of gravity on an exercise participant. A person can move and not experience the same discomfort that he/she might feel while on land. Perhaps most significantly, in the water participants attempting to balance on one foot will not face potential injuries should they fall over. Someone who manages to fall over in the water is simply not likely to face the possible breakage of any bones that the same fall would produce on land.

Unfortunately, cold water generally increases joint stiffness and therefore creates additional movement difficulty for people with arthritis. Typically, indoor pools are kept at 78 degrees, much too cold for Aquatics, water temperatures more appropriate for lap and competitive swimmers. In addition, the air outside the pool should also be warm. Moving from a warm pool into significant cooler air increases stiffness for people with arthritis.

Therefore, the need to heat both the pool and the air outside the water can make it difficult to find a facility willing to host Aquatics. These higher water temperatures also make the pool less attractive to lap swimmers, possibly reducing the pool use too much.

## **Why Water Weight is Good – Water Dumbbells for the Pool**

Staying fit is tough, especially when you are nursing an injury or struggling with joint pain. Low impact exercises, like biking or swimming, reduce impact on joints and ease the body through a workout. When considering the alternatives among low impact exercise programs don't overlook the advantages of performing your entire workout in water. In a pool, your body feels lighter. This phenomenon is known as buoyancy. The water actually holds you up, creating a safe environment for people of all fitness levels to exercise. In between exercises, you can relax, letting the water support your weight and relax your muscles.

In addition to providing a great low-impact exercise environment, working out in the pool can prove for more relaxing and refreshing than a regular, sweaty workout session.

Exercising in the pool also allows you to beat the heat, as the temperature of the water will help keep your body temperature down. This means you can workout in comfort and avoid any health risks associated with overheating.

The other primary benefit of working out in water is resistance. Essentially, any movement through the water requires you to push water out of the way. The water "pushes back," in a sense, adding resistance to each of your movements. This resistance is exactly the same as a lifting weight and helps strengthen muscles, ligaments, and bones.

Although exercising in the water doesn't necessarily require any equipment, a number of products have become available for working out in water in recent years. These products add to the effectiveness of the workout by adding support and resistance while you exercise.

Support belts are available to provide a little extra flotation (taking additional weight off of your knees and ankles). In addition, these belts provide lumbar support for your back and give you additional vertical balance.

A product that adds extra resistance to a water workout routine are water dumbbells. These function much like regular dumbbells, allowing you to perform all kinds of exercises with a little extra resistance.

Water dumbbells come in several varieties. The first are simply plastic coated versions of the dumbbells you are already familiar with. The dumbbells can be submerged in water and simply add weight as you perform your exercises. Another variety of water dumbbell floats in the pool, they are typically covered in EVA foam which is soft, non-abrasive, and won't irritate your skin or catch on your clothes. The handles are padded for extra comfort.

The floating variety of water dumbbells come in all shapes and sizes. Rounded dumbbells typically add resistance by increasing in size—the larger the dumbbell, the more resistance you experience as you pull them across the surface of the water. An alternate method for increasing resistance is available in triangular dumbbells. By turning the dumbbell, the leading surface can be alternated between the tip of the triangle (for less resistance), and the flat face of the dumbbell (providing more resistance).

Barbells provide an alternative to the one-handed dumbbells. These barbells are much like the one's you're used to seeing in the weight room and are used to add weight to exercises involving the back, shoulders, chest, and triceps (the back of the arm). They typically come in the EVA foam coated variety and float on the surface of the water.

A third type of dumbbell has paddle-wheel shaped fins on the end. A similar product is the "water fan." In addition to adding weight, these products have plastic fins on the end that spin as they move through the water. The paddle-wheel and the fan allow water to pass over or through them slowly, providing additional resistance to your exercises. Other products for adding weight to the workout include weights that strap onto the wrists and ankles, providing additional weight for aerobic workouts in the water.

If you're looking for an alternative to the hot, sweaty workouts available on land, consider exercising in the pool. Besides keeping you cool and comfortable, water workouts lower the impact on your joints and muscles, allowing you to exercise safely and lowering the risk of muscle strain and damage to your joints. If you want to get the most out of your workouts, consider obtaining water dumbbells. They add to the effectiveness of your exercises by increasing the resistance of your movements in the water.

### **Hydraulics is Not Just for Cars – Senior-Friendly Workout Equipment**

Hydraulics provides simple solutions for many of today's engineering and energy problems. The use of water is becoming more and more popular for its ability to recycle the energy back into cars that is expended by putting on the breaks. The principles of water energy have been used in almost every industry and now, hydraulics is making a statement in the fitness world, particularly with seniors. If water can energize and strengthen the capabilities of upcoming hybrid cars, it should be able to do the same for people. Seniors are now finding and showing that water can also power the machine which is the human body.

Water classes are filling up with seniors across the country because of the immediate and long-term benefits they are providing. While exercising in water is challenging because of the additional resistance, it is also one of the least invasive to the human body. Water invigorates the body by taking pressure off the joints. Classes done in warm water are soothing and tension-relieving. Also, finding others your age that is enjoying the benefits of working their hydraulics in water classes will not be a problem. Seniors everywhere are using water aerobics and water therapy for a number of physical conditions. The word is spreading that hydraulic principles are ready to work for the human body too.

Whether you are a senior in excellent physical shape or you have a condition which makes the thought of regular forms of exercise, like jogging or bicycling, seem like torture, be aware that water wellness is supplying seniors with an answer and way to stay in that great shape. Water aerobics is particularly beneficial to those who suffer from arthritis or joint pain associated with other conditions. Even an hour in the warm water, performing simple exercises, will alleviate their symptoms to near nonexistence.

Water exercise is also welcoming to those with Parkinson's disease, diabetes and for those who have suffered a stroke. If one has been diagnosed as overweight or obese by their doctor, water aerobics provides one of the safest and most accessible avenues to get fit. The stress which other non-water exercises would put on joints, which are already under too much weight, will no longer be an issue. Working the body in water will allow you to do lunges, jog and do leg lift easily.

Water classes are being enhanced by a number of water props. The equipment is making water classes more challenging and interesting. Almost any equipment that can be used outside the water is being redesigned for use in the water. The common, Styrofoam noodle, which is strewn freely in pools for children to enjoy, make great additions to a water workout. This prop makes a versatile tool for staying afloat and is not cumbersome like a life jacket or even a kickboard can be. Water enthusiasts are using water treadmills, weights or aqua barbells, webbed gloves, aqua-jogger weight belts and hand paddles.

Aqua shoes are also becoming popular for their assistance with gripping pool bottoms and providing additional support for especially weary joints. Most aqua class teachers are recommending the use of water shoes, not only for their gripping power, but because they allow for more concise movements in the water which can help burn extra calories. Many gyms and recreational centers are adding more and more aqua classes to their schedules and often include the equipment.

If you have your own pool, or even better, can join a gym or pool which offers water classes, then you can experience the hydraulics of water wellness for yourself. The equipment, especially the aqua shoes, can add a lot to your water workout. Make sure that you slowly incorporate equipment which increases resistance so you do not strain yourself. Do remember that aqua classes can also be as much of a challenge as you need if you want to burn a lot of calories, and that they can also be gateways to fitness which were closed before because of severe physical conditions.

An added benefit to joining your local water class is that many seniors are also using this casual atmosphere for some camaraderie and social time. Whether you are in great shape or not, water aerobics can let the hydraulics of water wellness work for your machine.

### **Maintain a Healthy Balance – Stability Ball Exercises for Seniors**

When I first saw a friend of mine using an exercise ball, I thought to myself, "I'd never be able to do that!" But after trying it out (very carefully), I found that using it was a snap. Actually, it made stretching and exercising fun and enjoyable. Using a stability ball, I was informed, also helps our balance as we get older.

A stability ball, for those of you who may not have seen one, is simply a large poly-vinyl ball (typically between 18 and 28 inches in diameter) that can be used in many ways during an exercise routine. It serves in place of a chair or floor mat (very handy for those of us who hate getting up and down from the floor during a workout). It can replace a wall or a bench during

stretching, and, as we will examine below, a stability ball offers some unique stretching opportunities of its own.

Before you start using a stability ball, or begin any exercise program, remember to talk to your doctor. He or she may recommend that you not use a stability ball or that you only use it in the presence of a trainer or aid.

The magic of the stability ball is that any exercise performed while sitting on it simultaneously improves your balance and posture. This is due to the fact that the stability ball requires you to unconsciously keep your weight centered in order to avoid its rolling out from underneath you. Any exercise you can perform while seated can be done while sitting on a stability ball, and all the while your balance and posture will be aided as well.

Another advantage of the stability ball is that its shape allows you a greater range of motion than a chair, or even the floor. This helps primarily when stretching the back.

The American Council on Exercise (a nonprofit fitness advocate) gives a number of example stretches that can be carried out with an exercise ball. Before performing these stretches, make sure you've already warmed up. Move slowly through each stretch and get used to the feeling of having the ball roll underneath you.

This is a good stretch for the back: Sit on top of the ball with your feet in front of you and your hands behind your head. Take small slow steps with your feet allowing your back to roll forward onto the ball. Soon your upper back will be curved over the top of the ball, providing an intense (and pleasurable) stretch. Try reaching your arms overhead for an additional stretch for the back.

The second example is the kneeling side stretch: start by kneeling upright on a mat with the ball at the side of your right hip, place your right hand on the ball and your left arm hanging close to your torso. Sweep your left arm in a wide arc up and over your head and back to the starting position. Repeat three to five times. Hold the final arc in a lifted position 10-30 seconds for a static stretch.

This one is called a pelvic circle: Sit on top of the ball with your feet slightly to the right and the left. Using your legs, slowly circle your hips clockwise three to five times; reverse, circling counterclockwise. The ball will roll slightly, aiding in the stretch. Focus on releasing tension in the hips and lower back.

The American Council on Exercise provides a brochure with additional information on using a stability ball for stretching. Several online sources exist for finding the right stability ball for you. The size of the ball depends on your height, and the type of stretches and exercises you wish to perform with the ball. Stores or online sources selling stability balls will be able to assist you in picking out the right one.

If your doctor thinks its right for you, an exercise ball provides a versatile tool for working out. It acts as a support during conventional stretching. In addition, a balance ball allow for several unique stretching possibilities of its own. Your balance is improved each time you sit upon it,

no matter what exercise you perform, and, when it comes down to it, using a stability ball while working out is just plain fun.

### **Circuit Training for Seniors – Finding the Right Gym for your Lifestyle**

Circuit training as a concept is designed to be exercise that achieves an all round physical fitness as opposed to fitness for a specific sport. Only by physically working the body can our muscular and respiratory system be improved on. Circuit training combines the use of physical resistance, aerobic and stretching activities to help increase the body's endurance capabilities. Not only seniors but women, new exercisers and even experienced exercisers will receive the benefits of circuit training.

For seniors, it is of course critical to starting at a low level increasing both intensity and duration gradually. You will want to be sure that a slowly progressing load is being placed on the exercisers cardiovascular system. Circuit training is not the same as weight training. In weight training, a person works at a high weight level, theoretically using the most weight a person can successfully handle for 8-12 repetitions. In weight training, the lifter then has a period of rest before making a second attempt at the exercise, repeating the weight level and the repetition numbers.

In circuit training, the exerciser works at a much lower level of weight or resistance, doing so usually over a period of time before moving to a different exercise. In circuit training there is often minimal rest between exercises. For a beginner's circuit, there are several basic rules that should be followed. As with any form of exercise, the circuit should begin with a thorough warm up and stretch. In addition, all aspects of the upcoming routine should be clearly demonstrated to the participants. Such a demonstration can be part of the warm up period if done properly.

A proper circuit will ensure that the amount of time spent on each exercise can be handled by the weakest member. When beginning a new circuit program, participants should have built in breaks, if not at least modest pauses between exercise stations. Finally, the process should also include a thorough cool down and stretch period so as to take the participants pulse down gradually.

Circuit training will likely include exercises to improve both physical strength and aerobic capacity during the session. Such training can include time on the universal weight lifting machine along with step climbers, treadmills, time spent doing stretches and the traditional exercise routines that are forms of sit ups, push ups, even the old-fashioned jumping jacks that were taught in our physical education as we grew up. Most athletes find an exercise program that they enjoy which will help them stay with the program. Same goes with seniors and circuit training. Often seniors will not only enjoy the exercise, the time out of the house, and the health benefits, but also the new found friends. This encourages seniors to return to the circuit training program.

In thinking about circuit training, seniors must find a locale that focuses on their respective needs. As mentioned earlier, the training sessions must be appropriate for all members of the group to have the proper impact. Obviously, over taxing the body during such sessions can lead

to injuries if not aches and pains that prevent future work outs. In examining the site, seniors should also pay close attention to the trainer that will be assigned to lead the circuit sessions. The trainer will be in charge throughout the work out so they must have a full understanding of a senior needs as well as a commitment to meet those needs. In addition a trainer who can make it fun, is willing to incorporate appropriate music and helps to motivate is critical for making the activity enjoyable.

Because of the socialization that accompanies circuit training; many seniors find this form of exercise best for them. By joining a club that has such sessions, you already have a built in support network of colleagues who are seeking to gain the same level of fitness you seek. A common aspect of senior circuit training is to create teams who work together while another team rests and coaches the first team into a positive effort. Sometimes, such groups may even want to have a healthy competition between teams. Most importantly, these classes provide participants with numerous exercise buddies that can then lead to other connections and additional exercise opportunities that are appropriate to your skill level.

## **8 Tips for Toning Your Tush for the AARP Set**

Who doesn't want a more attractive bottom line? Exercise mavens note that shaping the glutes (gluteus maximus, the official name for the muscles of your tush) is the single item most likely to appear on the priority lists of both men and women on all ages. It tends to creep its way up the priority list over the years as age and nature take their inevitable toll on the bottom line. The loss of muscle mass that goes along with aging is the prime culprit in sagging tushes and dropping bottom lines. However, say a fitness expert, that doesn't mean that you can't do anything to tone your tush, even in the golden years.

If you're looking to shape up your butt with just exercise, though, it won't be that easy. According to Women's Sports & Fitness magazine, it takes a combination of healthy diet, cardio exercise and specific shaping exercises to get that shapely, rounded and firm bottom that is everyone's goal. Because the rear end is one of the body's storehouses for fat, you can shape and firm the underlying muscles all you want – but it won't make a difference if you can't see them through the layer of fat that covers them.

In addition, some of the best butt-sculpting exercises are ones that can be hazardous if you've been diagnosed with osteoporosis or arthritis. Here are the best tips for seniors who want to tone their tushes – the safe and fun way.

Before undertaking any exercise program, see your doctor to get his blessing. Exercise is a good thing – and most doctors will be happy to refer you to a professional who can help you design a workout program that's perfect for you.

Take a good look at your diet and tune it up. Eating healthy will help keep that fat padding over your bottom to a minimum and let all the effort you're putting into toning your tush show through.

The best toners for your tush are stair-climbing and jogging – exercises that work those gluteus muscles to the max. They also have the advantage of being aerobic – they'll keep your cardio and pulmonary systems working at top capacity and reduce the risks of heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, arthritis and osteoporosis.

To get maximum benefit from your walking and jogging, you can add light weights to ankles. That way you also take advantage of strength and resistance training that can strengthen your bones and help improve your balance.

If your doctor or physical therapist Okays them, squat thrusts are amazingly efficient at sculpting your bottom into shape. Because one-leg thrusts put all your body's weight on one leg, you'll be practicing balance as well as improving your bottom line. Don't do these if you have osteoporosis or any type of arthritis, though. The risk of compression fractures is too great.

If your doctor feels that jogging and stair climbing are too risky because of joint problems, it doesn't mean you can't work those glutes. Jogging and working out in water takes the pressure off joints and eliminates impact stress entirely, while increasing the benefits of most exercise because of the added water resistance. Check with your doctor to be sure, but most experts feel that water aerobics are an excellent alternative to high-impact and joint-stressing exercises like jogging.

Another alternative to high impact, weight bearing aerobics is chair aerobics. Seated exercise may sound like a contradiction in terms, but you can get one heck of a good workout for your butt with leg bounces, knee lifts and crossing scissor-kicks all without ever standing up on your own two feet.

Among the physical activities that are great for your bottom are golfing, walking, swimming, jogging, dancing and bowling. If a regular exercise program isn't for you, engage in one of these activities three times a week (or three of them once a week or.. you get the idea) for at least half an hour.

A regular workout and exercise program that focuses on toning your tush is a great way to keep your body looking – and feeling – young and healthy. Don't let a sagging bottom bring your spirits down – join in the fun and trim your bottom line.

### **Strength Training = Strong Bones**

A critical aspect of aging is the general weakening of both muscle tissue and our bones themselves. One of the surest ways to reduce the stress on our weakening bones is to increase our muscles mass through strength training. Strength training has repeatedly been shown to be a safe and effective method of reversing muscle loss in the elderly. This muscle loss, referred to as sarcopenia, actually begins around age 45. At that time, the average person's muscle mass begins to decline at a rate of about 1 percent per year.

Because of this natural deterioration of the body, strength training has become an important aspect of senior physical exercise routines. Simply stated, strength training helps prevent the breakdown of healthy muscle tissue and bones and strengthens connective tissues around the joints such as ligaments. The stronger a person's body is, the less chance that person has of an injury through accidents, as well as greater improving resistance to virus related illnesses.

Recent findings show the positive impacts of just a 12-week strength-training program. In a group of volunteers with the joint disease osteoarthritis, muscle strength increased by 14 percent while balance improved by 55 percent after the 12-week program. Flexibility reportedly improved by 17 percent, while pain decreased by 30 percent.

In another group of volunteers with chronic kidney disease, the same 12-week regiment also had a profound effect. These volunteers, on low-protein diets, still increased their muscle fiber by 32 percent and muscle strength by 30 percent after training. In contrast, those who did not train lost about 9 pounds, or 3 percent of their body weight.

When it comes to strength training, there are generally two types of training that are featured in magazines, body sculpting and bodybuilding. The first type of training is the form that best fits seniors and their needs. Body sculpting theory generally speaks to the ability of women to add approximately 5lbs of muscle and for men up to 10lbs.

Weight training should be done in very short sessions as not only does excess work out time reduce the body building aspects, it will also lead to greater muscle soreness and prevent you from feeling loose the next time you work out. As you work out, you should also pause between exercises to catch your breath. For the best results, work with weights on a good quality exercise machines, starting with a weight that allows the performance of 8 –12 repetitions of the exercise. After performing the lift, rest for about 60 seconds then perform a second set of 8 –10 repetitions. All gyms now have qualified instructors - take advantage of these folks to check on the weight you are using as well as your technique as you perform each lift.

When weight training, seek to perform a weight training session two times a week, with two days rest between sessions and never train severely sore muscles. As with any form of exercise be sure to warm-up and stretch before you work out as well as cool down and stretch once you have finished.

An interesting aspect of weight training comes from the element of desired weight reduction that many seniors seek. Because older people need to reduce their body fat to prevent other health problems, including heart disease and diabetes, many seek that reduction through dieting. But excess fat does have the benefit of maintaining bone mass while fat loss through diet alone often leads to loss of bone, accelerating bone loss due to aging and increasing the risk factor for fractures.

When it comes to increasing bone density however, older people have to exercise very hard and for a period longer than six months. Though moderate-intensity exercise can increase fitness and reduce body fat gains in bone density occur only among those who achieve a substantial fitness level. However, when fat loss comes as a result of exercise, there isn't a corresponding loss of bone mass that occurs when patients lose weight through dieting techniques. Creating greater physical strength is seen as a excellent method for reducing the risk of bone fractures.

Because most seniors who break a bone generally do so after a fall, increasing muscle strength directly improves balance, helping to prevent the very falls that can lead to breaks.

Therefore strength training is one of the most important ways to slow down the process of aging and protect virtually all of the body's functions.

### **Seniors Declare Martial Law**

Tai Chi, an ancient Chinese martial art that consists of a series of very slow, gentle, and continuous movements, is highly suitable as a low-impact exercise activity for senior citizens. Practicing the ancient art enables older people to develop stronger muscles and increase both their balance and concentration. Therefore, this low-impact activity helps the elderly regain physical functioning that may have been lost during periods of inactivity.

One recent study involved 72 people between the ages of 65 and 96. One group was given an hour-long class twice a week for a period of six months while the second group was promised a four-week class at the end of the study. Even with this low-impact program being held only twice a week, significant improvements emerged after just three months. More importantly, benefits improved additionally as the study moved to six months of participation, a clear indication that additional health gains could be derived from a longer periods of participation.

These findings contrasted with previous research on exercise programs that suggested much longer periods of time were needed to show significant improvements. At the completion of the study, the Tai Chi students demonstrated increased confidence in their ability to perform more vigorous exercises. Also in sharp contrast to previous research regarding exercise programs where data indicated that half of all sedentary people are unable to maintain their newly adopted exercise program, only 18 percent of participants in the Tai Chi class dropped out of the program.

The research from the study appears to indicate that Tai Chi is a more attractive form of fitness activity for an aging population. In fact, class members called the lessons a positive experience, with many reporting wide ranging benefits that increased personal energy and while also relaxing them at the same time.

In considering Tai Chi as an exercise method, consider the following results of this second study published in a recent article in the Journal of Advanced Nursing. A study of fall-prone senior citizens, living in residential care with an average age of 78, examined 59 individuals. Twenty-nine members of the test group were given a 12-week Tai Chi course, three times a week. Thirty members of the test study formed a non-exercise control group.

The twenty-nine member group involved in Tai Chi showed significant improvement in their physical fitness. Among the many improvements were stronger knee and ankle muscles, increased mobility and flexibility, and perhaps most importantly, better balance. After the exercise program had finished, the time taken by the Tai Chi group to walk six meters had fallen by 25 per cent, while the control group took 14 per cent longer.

The exercise program used in the research consisted of a 35 minute total workout. Subjects began with 10 minutes of warm up then followed that up with, 20 minutes of Sun-style Tai Chi movement. To complete the workout, the active group finished with five minutes of cooling down exercises. While involved with the exercises, traditional instrumental music was played as an aid to help the group maintain the slow and continuous movements that Tai Chi demands.

Prior to the 12-week exercise program and then again after it had been completed, both groups underwent a number of physical tests to assess their muscle strength, balance and confidence in avoiding falls. The study's participants also reported any falls that they experienced during the 12-week period. While 31 per cent of the exercise group said they had had a fall, the non-fitness oriented group reported a 50 per cent fall rate. These numbers contrasted significantly with those from data taken the year before the research was done. While the control group had an almost identical 57 per cent fall rate the prior year, the exercise group had reported that 66 per cent of them had had a fall.

Even a low-intensity exercise such as Tai Chi has enormous potential for increased health in seniors. Because it helps older people avoid falls through the development of balance and muscle strength, the martial arts exercise would also help keep seniors from the bone fractures that often accompany such falls. Perhaps most importantly, it is precisely the low-impact, modestly strenuous activity that is actually reasonable for previously sedentary seniors to do without overloading their bodies with too much physical stress.

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