

[IMAGE]

Enjoying the Golden Years: Staying Fit for Life

By Perry Nickelston, DC

Ah, the Golden Years; that long-awaited time to sit back, relax and enjoy the rest of your life after decades of hard work. Not so fast - it's also the time during which the natural aging process can wreak havoc on your body. Why? Muscle mass decreases as people age; beginning in the fourth decade of life, adults lose 3-5 percent of muscle mass per decade, and the decline increases to 1-2 percent *per year* after age 50.

Anti-aging metabolic hormones such as growth hormone and testosterone also plummet as we age. These hormones are responsible for building lean muscle and preventing tissue breakdown. Fortunately, we can do something about it: These hormones are primarily increased with regular physical activity.

Eldery by the pool - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark It's the old adage, "Use it or lose it!" Exercise is of vital importance for older adults. It keeps you strong, helps burn calories and maintain weight, improves flexibility, and contributes to balance and bone strength. What are the best types of exercise? A regimen that builds lean muscle and promotes endurance, flexibility and stability is the goal. Here are six of the most effective exercise options to accomplish this with minimal risk of injury. It is highly recommended that you consult your doctor for a complete physical evaluation prior to starting any new exercise routine.

1. Brisk Walking

Walking is a great low-impact form of cardiovascular activity. It improves endurance and lean muscle tone in your legs. The key is to avoid walking too slow; maintain a brisk pace with long strides and arm swings. Adding ankle or wrist weights to enhance aerobic calorie-burning helps send more oxygen to your heart, increasing endurance. Even low- to moderate-intensity walking can have both short- and long-term health benefits.

Eldery by the pool 2 - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark How fast is brisk? Determine your target training heart rate and maintain this pace for at least 30 to 60 minutes, three to four days per week. (For example, a good target heart rate for a 60-64-year-old is 96-120 beats per minute. For more information on target training heart rates by age, read "Find Your Fat-Burning, Muscle-Building Zone" in this issue.) A variety of heart rate watches are available to help track your target heart rate during exercise. Try changing

your terrain by walking up hills and stairs for added resistance and difficulty. Better yet, throw on some hiking boots and hit the open wilderness trails and commune with Mother Nature. Just remember not to push too hard or put yourself in a position to fall or otherwise injure yourself.

2. Resistance Training

Don't worry, you won't end up looking like Arnold Schwarzenegger by doing a little resistance exercise, and it's important to maintain your existing muscle tone as you age; the most effective way is via strength training. However, instead of using your typical weights and gym equipment, try working out with rubber tubes and bands instead. These give you added resistance in two directions, making for a more effective workout and much less chance of injury to your joints, ligaments and tendons. There is no need to lift heavy weights to burn calories and increase strength. Just 20 minutes three to four times per week with bands or tubes can make significant changes in how your body looks and feels. Optimum results are obtained with fast-paced, full-body routines. Again, remember to start slow and talk to your doctor before beginning any new exercise regimen.

3. Yoga

Talk about a powerful exercise routine that can add relaxation and fun to your life! There are many videos available on the subject, but I strongly recommend attending a class for beginners or seniors to ensure proper technique. Working with an instructor and a group of like-minded, health-conscious people is a wonderful way to get in shape and expand your social circle at the same time.

One of the best health benefits derived from yoga is learning to control your breathing. Breathing from your diaphragm instead of your lungs increases oxygen and blood flow to the cells of your body. The more oxygen you have in your system, the more you increase endurance and longevity. Yoga poses also give your muscles sustained isometric contraction, making them stronger and more resistant to injury.

4. Swimming

Regular swimming builds endurance, muscle strength and cardiovascular fitness. Swimming tones your upper *and* lower body because you're using almost all of your major muscle groups. There is low risk for swimming injuries because there's no stress on your bones, joints or connective tissues due to buoyancy, and the fact that you weigh one-tenth less in water.

Eldery does yoga - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark Start slowly; experts recommend that beginner swimmers start with 12-20 minutes of swimming. Once your strokes become more efficient, your ability to swim longer will, too. For exercise purposes, the best stroke to use in the pool is freestyle - move your arms in a windmill motion while your body pivots and you breathe on the side of the arm that's out of the water.

To keep your swimming routine fresh, mix up the freestyle stroke with other strokes and you'll be working different muscles for a more effective workout every time. Not sure about technique? Take lessons at your local YMCA, YWCA or community center. Detailed descriptions of common swimming strokes (including pictures) are available online through a variety of resources.

5. Bicycling

Of course, cycling is a great way to get around town while saving the environment. It's also a great way to stay healthy. Cycling offers one of the most effective cardiovascular workouts with focus on using your leg muscles, and it's easy on the joints, unlike running. People who ride regularly have improved aerobic fitness, decreased cardiovascular load and increased use of fats as an energy source during physical activity (rather than being stored).

Exercise declines with age, yet cyclists show a smaller decline than those involved in gym activities.

Cycling is an activity that you can safely adopt without the risks of more strenuous exercises. A non-sport exercise such as cycling allows year-round participation as part of a daily routine.

Do a Google search on the Internet to find local riding clubs in your area, or stop by your local cycle shop to find plenty of organized riding events from beginner to advanced levels. Just remember your helmet!

6. Active Stretching

Yes, stretching can be an effective workout if done correctly. I recommend a technique called active isolated stretching (AIS). Use a strap or rope hooked around your foot to assist with the stretches. This is different than static stretching, where you hold a stretch for 20 -30 seconds. Static stretching actually increases your risk of injury if you perform the moves too aggressively. AIS is performed actively: You move your muscles back and forth in a controlled manner instead of holding them in one position.

Eldery with bike - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark AIS is based on the principle of reciprocal inhibition, which simply means you contract (shorten) the muscle opposite the muscle you want to stretch.

As you contract one muscle, its opposite has to relax due to this reflex. By taking advantage of this reflex, you get a greater stretch than you would otherwise. AIS helps to overcome injuries by balancing muscles, going through all the available motions and decreasing stress on your joints. After a 15-minute session, you will feel dramatic changes in your body. For even more benefit, perform these stretches prior to doing any of the exercises listed above.

Well, there you have it: Six fun ways to keep your body lean and healthy no matter your age. What more could you ask for? Take your time and introduce new exercise programs slowly, combining different options for variety. With time, these routines will become easier to perform as the health benefits build exponentially. So get out there and enjoy your Golden Years. With regular, appropriate exercise, you'll have the time of your life!

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