

[IMAGE]

In Shape for Life

By Dr. Jasper Sidhu

As we age, physical fitness tends to take a backseat. With less activity comes a long list of ailments that can be prevented through simple exercise. The key to maintaining overall health as time goes by is to get out and start moving. Whether it's in the gym or at home - physical fitness is critical when it comes to your health.

My father is 75 years old. He had bypass surgery 10 years ago and also suffers from diabetes. Apart from that, he has had neck pain and dizziness on and off for most of his life. And let's not forget the low back pain that pops up once in awhile. My friends all love meeting my dad, except in one place: the fitness center. Although he's more than twice their age, they're unable to keep up with him on the treadmill. It hasn't always been this way. My father started exercising regularly after he retired 10 years ago. Now he is in the best shape of his life. Let's talk about how you can get there, too.

Exercise Is Natural Medicine

man and woman biking - Copyright â Stock Photo / Register Mark The bad news is that after the age of 40 or so, we tend to lose about 0.5 to 2 percent of muscle each year. If you aren't concerned about looking good, then also realize that this loss of muscle is a large factor in falls in older age, which can often lead to fractures and even death. Osteoporosis is also a large risk factor for falls and fractures. The good news is there are natural ways to maintain muscle and avoid these health issues.

Research suggests that circulation is better in younger people than in older people. Simple everyday things can be done to help make blood flow identical to those of the young. Yes, I do mean identical.

When I mention these statistics to my patients, the first thing they ask is, "What wonder drug can help with this?" They are more than surprised to hear that exercise is the answer, *not a drug*. In fact, it's becoming more and more common these days for doctors to understand that exercise is in fact, medicine. Stick to the following blueprint and you'll reap the benefits.

Step 1: Move: Sitting Is Dangerous to Your Health

I've had many patients give me every excuse under the sun of why they *can't* exercise. They are not to blame for this. I understand that most people have aches, pains and limitations that prevent them from exercising. If you are one of these, then you would be happy to know that the first step in moving toward being more active is quite simple. The first goal is to avoid sitting or resting for long periods of time. A recent study found that people who sit for most of the day are 54 percent more likely to die of a heart attack. The shocking fact is that this is independent on whether you smoke or exercise. Sitting for long periods still increases the risk. Make sure to get up every hour, even if it is to stand or walk around the room. This small change is a significant first step in getting you moving.

Step 2: Start a Walking Program

This does not mean going out for an hour-long walk if you have been sedentary. Start with small steps. The best way to do this is to get a simple pedometer. They cost a few dollars and are well worth it. Stick to your regular routine for the first week and record how many steps you walk every day. This will be your baseline. The following week, increase this number by 10 percent. For example, if you regularly walk about 500 steps a day, increase it to 550 the week after. Do this every week until you can get to a goal of 10,000 steps per day. This is the big goal, so don't aim for it from the start. It's about aiming for smaller goals first and then reaching them.

Find creative ways to walk, rather than making it a chore. Most people are shocked to find that small breaks of walking throughout the day are sometimes more beneficial than blocking off a set period of time. If you drive to the store, park farther away than you usually do. In fact, try parking on the other side of the mall and walking to the store you need to get to. Get rid of the television remote control. If you need to change channels, walk up to the TV and do it yourself. Take the stairs rather than the elevator. You can come up with many creative ways to change up your routine.

Address any aches and pains before starting on a program. Most of my patients start off great. After a few weeks, they come back and begin complaining about aches and pains, which often forces them to quit. More often than not, seeing your chiropractic provider can help prevent this from happening. It's also wise to get screened for orthotics (shoe inserts) and get recommendations for the right shoes. A simple stretching program can also go a long way toward avoiding setbacks.

Step 3: Stretch

The good news when it comes to stretching is that you don't need to spend as much time holding a stretched position as we previously thought. That's because we are often confused about the difference between stretching and warming up. Warming up is about moving body parts slowly and through a full range of motion until your muscles get warmed up. This is the best thing to do before you start any exercise program. Research has shown that static stretching, holding a position for several seconds or more, can sometimes be responsible for increasing the risk of injury, not decreasing the risk.

For example, consider the hamstrings, the muscles on the back of our thigh. Most of you are probably familiar with hurdle stretches, or at least reaching down to touch your toes. Well, these positions can have negative effects on your back if you have any history of back pain or other health condition in which flexing forward is not recommended (osteoporosis, arthritis, low back pain, etc).

Instead, sit on a high chair and extend your leg out, hold for a second and then slowly bring it back in. This is called *dynamic stretching*, and for some people, it's easier to do. It also keeps your muscles moving, and warmed up. However, getting your muscles tested before increasing your fitness program is also recommended. Your chiropractic provider can assess which muscles are tight and which are weak. They can then prescribe the right type of exercise program to address these muscles.

man stretching - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark Step 4: Do Some Strength Training

Surprisingly, most of my older patients believe that it may be too late to start a strength-training program. They feel that improvements are only seen in younger people. This is the biggest myth out there. In fact, researchers at University of Michigan Health System found that an adult can add 2.42 pounds of lean muscle and increase overall strength by 25 to 30 percent after 18 weeks of resistance training. This can occur well into the 80s and 90s, so it's never too late to start.

Start with your own body weight. Weight training doesn't mean joining a gym and lifting heavy weights. Start off by getting up from a seat, or slowly sitting down on a seat. This mimics a squat exercise and can be done safely without fear of falling. There are many exercises out there that can be done with your own body weight to start.

Progress to resistance elastic bands. After using your own body weight for a few weeks, start using elastic bands. Once you get comfortable with this, you can progress to using weights. However, consult your chiropractic provider before starting your weight-training program. They will be able to evaluate which areas need to be addressed through stretching or specific adjustments before you begin the program. Getting prepared will go a long way in preventing any injuries that could limit you from continuing.

Lifting lighter weights with more repetitions is just as effective. One of the biggest obstacles for my patients is that they think they will have to lift heavy weights to see any difference. This is not so. A recent research study by McMaster University found that muscles have the same benefits when someone uses lighter weights and repetitions of 20 to 25, rather than heavier weights and low repetitions, as often seen with bodybuilders. For the older population, strength training just two times per week can be effective.

Putting It All Together

Exercise doesn't have to be complicated to be effective. Walking can be done at any time. Strengthening can be done using your own body weight. Simply getting up from a chair and manually changing the television channel will go a long way in providing the additive effects of exercise. Take a small break during commercials to walk around or do some squats. Lack of creativity is the only thing that could hold you back.

As for my dad, he started the same way. He started off with a small walk after dinner. Then he got his feet evaluated for orthotics. That helped prevent shin splints or other types of pain that some people may experience when they start a new activity. Eventually, he was able to progress to hitting the gym on a regular basis. Not bad for an out-of-shape retiree who had triple bypass surgery.

Jasper Sidhu, DC, graduated from Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College in 1994 and opened the Downtown Injury Rehab Centre in Windsor, Ontario, incorporating vibration training into the rehabilitation part of his practice. He is vice president of clinical services for WAVE Manufacturing (www.wavexercise.com).

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