

## Strength Training: What Can It Do For You?

Some of us are satisfied that we've met our workout goals when – four or five days a week -- we do a bit of stretching, then hop on the exercise bike or treadmill, or go walking.

Are we missing something here?

Absolutely, say the experts. We're missing one of the key components that make our exercise sessions complete. We're not getting strength training.

The best exercise program includes four different components, according to the National Institute on Aging (NIA): *endurance* (such as walking or cycling) to strengthen the heart and circulatory system and improve overall fitness; *stretching* to promote flexibility and keep limber, and to prevent injury during the endurance phase; *balance* to help maintain stability and prevent falls; and *strength training* to build muscle tissue and reduce age-related muscle loss.

We're not talking about training to enter body building contests! We're just talking about how strength training can improve your daily functioning. Sarcopenia, the technical term for muscle loss, can be noticed as early as the 40s and may result in a loss of muscle strength of approximately one percent per year. If nothing is done to counteract this decline, one potentially may lose as much as 20-30 percent of muscle strength by the 60s and 70s. So it's small wonder that many seniors complain of difficulty opening jars, lifting items, or even getting up out of chairs.

Strength training works muscles against some type of resistance; this makes the muscles contract with greater force. Over time, the result is stronger muscles and in some cases, increased size. Many benefits come from this: improvement in muscle function and flexibility, increased bone density, reduction in symptoms associated with diabetes, heart disease and other chronic conditions, lowered body fat, and increased self-confidence in looking more fit.

A study conducted at Tufts University's Nutrition Research Center on Aging found that seniors with osteoarthritis taking part in a 12-week strength-training program increased their muscle strength by 14 percent and balance by 55 percent. They also reported considerable decrease in pain and improvement in flexibility.

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So what does strength training entail? The NIA says that you should work all major muscle groups--the upper arm and back of the arm, shoulders and upper back, chest muscles and middle back, abdominal muscles, thighs, hamstrings and calves.

Just as important as doing the exercises is carrying them out properly and safely by stretching before the weight-lifting, starting slow, and repeating them two to three times per week, on nonconsecutive days. It's especially important to consult your physician before beginning an exercise program if you have previously been inactive. Slight fatigue and soreness is normal after strength training but pain and exhaustion is not.

The equipment you use need not be expensive – you can purchase elastic bands, rubber tubing, or weights. The NIA suggests using soup cans as weights; other experts discourage the use of homemade weights. Or, you may wish to join a fitness club or YMCA.

This resource will help you get started:

- <http://medlineplus.gov>: click on “NIH SeniorHealth” in the right column. On the page that displays, click on “Click to begin” to display a list of topics. Click on “Exercise for Older Adults” for a table of contents. Here you will get information about how much and how often you should exercise, exercises, safety tips and other things to help you improve your strength and overall physical health. You can also go directly to “Exercises to Try” by visiting <http://nihseniorhealth.gov/exercise/strengthexercises/04.html> and clicking on “Strength Exercises.”

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