

Exercise Benefits for Seniors

Celebration News Article

By: Dr. Brad Homan, D.O., Celebration Orthopedics

April 5, 2007 - In case you haven't heard, the "baby boomer" generation has been hitting retirement. Our seniors are increasing both in total number and in proportion to the total population. Aging is a complex process that results in a decline in many of our bodily functions, but regular exercise can slow down some of the undesirable effects of getting older. The benefits of exercise both physically and psychologically in the elderly have been well documented. To better understand the positive effects of exercise on our bodies as we age, let's first look at some of the effects of aging.

Between the ages of 30 and 70, we lose approximately 30% of our work capacity. Muscle strength and mass decrease, our heart productivity and lung capacity decreases, and our kidney and liver function decreases. Women lose 30% of their bone mass by age 70, and men lose half that amount. Joint flexibility also decreases as we get older. Sounds pretty grim, but I have good news—as much as 50% of our decline in work capacity is due to disuse and is completely preventable.

Elderly individuals have been shown to demonstrate increased heart and lung function in response to exercise. Both physical endurance and strength improve, and this leads to loss of fat and a gain in lean muscle mass. Flexibility increases and the rate of bone loss decreases. Exercise also has psychological benefits that may prevent both anxiety and depression. Lack of exercise has been linked to decreased mobility and an increased risk of falling. Physical fitness leads to better motor control, coordination, and balance.

It is important to consider any medical conditions prior to initiating an exercise program and consultation with a health care provider may be prudent to avoid complications. An exercise program should be suited to each individual's needs and physical condition. Also, it is important to include a proper warm-up and cool-down period with any exercise program.

Getting older doesn't have to mean becoming sedentary. The benefits of regular exercise are present for all age groups and can decrease the detrimental effects of aging. So stay active—it may be the best way to stay young.