

Healthy Living for Seniors

by Cameron L. Martz, ACSM H/FI

Sir Isaac Newton said it best:

"A body at rest tends to stay at rest. A body in motion, tends to stay in motion."

What is fitness?

When we think about exercise and fitness, images of Jack LaLane or Jane Fonda may come to mind, but fitness isn't about physique or an obsession with training. Physical fitness is about capabilities: it's about strength and stamina, it's about vitality and energy level, it's about an improved immune system and increased lifespan. The fitter we are, the more we can play with our kids or grandkids, the more groceries we can carry, the more we can enjoy a vacation.

While I don't think that I need to convince you that exercise is important for our health, here are some other benefits of increased fitness that may surprise you:

- Exercise can result in increased sensory perception (vision and hearing, in particular).
- Exercise can result in improved memory.

"A recent study tracked the exercise habits and mental function of nearly 6000 women aged 65 and older. 'For every extra mile walked per week, there was a 13% smaller chance of cognitive decline.'"

- Exercise can reverse the effects of smoking. Of course, quitting smoking is the first step that smokers can make for their health, but ex-smokers who exercise have been shown to heal some of the damage done to their lungs, skin, and blood vessels.

What's the problem?

Why is physical fitness so elusive to us? It can be summed up in one word- inactivity. Whether you believe in evolution or creation or some combination of the two, we are not designed to be sedentary. Those organisms already abound. They're called plants. We eat them and use them for decoration. There once was a very sedentary animal known as the "giant sloth." We ate them, too, until there were no more left to eat. These are bad role models for us.

Our diets are also awful, and though what we eat is very important to our health, that is not as much of an issue as is our general lack of activity. Humanity has dealt with famine throughout our history, but only recently have we been faced with the health threat of the desk job or retirement. We have developed many defenses against a poor diet, however,

we are not so prepared to deal with inactivity. So, if you are going to make only one change in your life to improve your health, it should be to MOVE MORE.

Every little thing we do to consciously increase our fitness acts in synergy with the others. Here are some of those “little things” that can help to crank up that momentum:

- 1. Walk instead of ride.** You’ve heard this before. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Stop spending 15 minutes trying to find the closest parking spot everywhere you drive. This simple habit will help to kick your metabolism up throughout your day.
- 2. Get 10 minutes of real sunlight every day.** At a minimum, the body needs 10 minutes of sunlight every three days to produce enough Vitamin D to sustain itself. Of course, this isn’t the only reason to get outside during the day. The amount of sunlight we receive can have a direct impact on our mood and energy level. Alaskans get a tax dividend for a reason.
- 3. Maintain a regular sleep schedule.** *Our bodies seek rhythm.* Have you ever walked by a music store in the mall only to find you’re walking in step with the beat? This tendency towards rhythm is so strong that we can’t help ourselves. It takes effort to avoid a rhythm, and sleep is no different. Without a healthy sleep pattern, your energy level and motivation will suffer.

Of course, we’re not going to sell our cars and walk everywhere, so at some point we will benefit from spending time exercising in the classic sense. We can break exercise up into two types: cardiovascular exercise and strength training.

Cardiovascular Exercise

Cardiovascular exercise is all about our hearts. In order to improve our cardiovascular health, we need to elevate our heart rates for a sustained period of time. How you do this is not really that important. Walking, swimming, or riding a stationary bike are all great ways to get your heart rate up and keep it there. What’s important is that you pick an activity that is easy for you to do on a regular basis. At a minimum, we want to spend about 30 minutes, 3 times each week on cardiovascular exercise, though in general, there is nothing wrong with taking hour-long walks every day of the week, for example.

What about weights?

Our understanding about the importance of strength training has greatly increased in the last decade. It turns out that weights are important for everyone, not just bodybuilders and teenage boys. Strength training provides the best stimulus for increasing our muscle mass, which is what burns most of the calories that we consume. Build more muscles, and you will burn more calories every second of every day.

Strength training also builds strong bones. Lifting weights causes our bones to bend—they're not rigid at all. This bending stimulates them to absorb more minerals, especially calcium. This is important for everyone, not just women. You can take all of the calcium supplements you want, you can eat chalk, but your body won't absorb it without the proper stimulus. So, for optimal health, you should incorporate strength training into your schedule, as well.

Weight training does not require a 30,000 sq. ft. fitness facility, although there are many advantages to joining a gym when one is available. First, a greater variety of exercises can be performed in a dedicated fitness facility. Second, many gyms have staff that are skilled at developing individualized training programs and on instructing people on the proper form for safe strength training. That said, a set of dumbbells and a sturdy chair are all you really need to get a great workout once you know what to do.

Strength training is done to supplement our cardiovascular exercise, so we only need to use weights once or twice each week to start seeing some results.

Healthy Diet vs. Dieting

OK. So I said that increasing our activity was most important, but we can still have a great impact on our health by eating better. Notice that I did not say "by eating less." We need to distinguish the difference between having a healthy diet and dieting. A healthy diet provides us with the fuel to power our bodies and the nutrients to keep them healthy. Dieting, on the other hand, is a method of inducing a caloric deficit through the restriction of calories, and this restriction is often severe.

All weight loss diets have several effects that are contrary to a long-term improvement in fitness. Severely restricting your calories will:

- lower your metabolism
- result in loss of muscle tissue
- decrease your bone density
- lower your immune function
- decrease your energy level
- increase your sensitivity to outside stress

Basic Nutrition Guidelines

What constitutes healthy eating? In the state of North Carolina, only a licensed nutritionist can tell you exactly what you should eat, but I can share with you two helpful hints that will point you in the right direction:

- 1. Drink more water.** Water is an essential nutrient. It is responsible for the breakdown of fat into forms that your muscles can use for fuel. It also transports other nutrients throughout your body and aids in the removal of metabolic waste.
- 2. Eat more colors.** Diversity of diet is important to avoiding any long-term deficits in nutrition, and it turns out that the color of our food is a good proxy for the type of nutrition it contains. By eating a greater variety of colors each day, we help ourselves to increase the range of nutrients that we get from food rather than pills.