

# Exercise for life!

Falls are a major risk for older people, but being active will keep you steady on your feet, stave off bone and muscle loss and help you live longer. So what are you waiting for?

**P**utting your feet up is the last thing you should do as you get older. A recent report by Age Concern revealed that the over-65s do 'worryingly low levels of exercise', contributing to a higher risk of falls, heart disease and lack of independence. Yet, it's never too late to start exercising or increase your activity levels, and research shows it has real benefits for your health, whatever your age or ability.

In some ways, the ageing process makes it even more important to be active in your sixties and beyond. 'Our minds and bodies naturally decline unless we make an effort to prevent or reverse the process,' says Melody Chawner, a physiotherapist who works with older people.

## THE AGEING PROCESS

As we age, we become unsteady on our feet due to weaker muscles, less flexibility and deterioration in the sensory system that controls balance. From our thirties, we lose muscle at the rate of one per cent a year. And because an ageing body absorbs less calcium, a woman's bone density can drop by 60 per cent over a lifetime.

All this has serious consequences for our quality of life unless we take action. Weaker bones and muscles mean an increased risk of falls. A third of over-65s hurt themselves this way each year, rising to half of people over 80. Brittle bones lead to hip fractures, and half of people who break their hip live for less than a year afterwards. Then there's the lack of independence associated with immobility and poor strength. Research shows a fifth of the over-70s struggle with basic activities such as dressing and going to the loo. 'It's a vicious circle,'

says Michael Rennie, professor of clinical physiology at the University of Nottingham. 'You feel unsteady on your feet so you don't go out. But if you don't use it, you lose it.'

The answer is to exercise – it has so many benefits, it's a wonder every 60-something isn't jogging round the block right now! A US study tracked more than 1,500 people aged 70-90 over a decade and found that physical activity was the biggest single predictor against death, lowering risk by 37 per

cent. Regular exercise combats heart disease, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, some cancers and depression, plus there are social benefits.

'Regular activity when you're older promotes muscle strength, protects bones and, most importantly, helps you retain independence,' says Chawner. Active people are up to 45 per cent less likely to suffer a fracture due to stronger bones and muscles, and exercise at the right intensity even benefits your joints.

So, if you're unused to exercise, start gradually. Seek advice from a GP who can refer you to an NHS physiotherapist for a suitable regime or from an experienced exercise instructor. And don't worry if you're not in perfect health. 'Few medical problems rule out exercise,' says Dawn Skelton, an exercise physiologist at the University of

Manchester and a director of Later Life Training, which trains fitness instructors. 'Exercise is not recommended without medication if you have an uncontrolled condition such as high blood pressure,' she says. 'But conditions including angina, asthma and hip replacements don't stop you being active.'

Not long ago, patients with arthritis were told to 'take it easy' but not any more. Sports scientist Bettina Karsten, of the University of Greenwich, says, 'Joint weakness improves with exercise.

You should not be active during arthritic "flare-ups", but at other times regular

activity keeps the joints supple.'

So now you know it's good for you, how do you get started? There are exercise rules, no matter what your age. For most activities, you should spend five to 10 minutes gently warming up and stretching, and the correct kit is crucial, to avoid injury. Dr Skelton says, 'It's never too late to become active. Start gradually by increasing your habitual activity. Walk more, get off the bus a stop earlier,

**TO INCREASE YOUR ACTIVITY LEVELS, FIND SOMETHING YOU ENJOY AND DO IT REGULARLY**

## The road to healthy joints

● **EAT OILY FISH** The omega-3 oils keep joints supple and may reduce inflammation.  
● **TRY GLUCOSAMINE SULPHATE TABLETS** This chemical is produced naturally in healthy joints.

Supplements may improve joint mobility and ease osteoarthritis.  
● **SHED EXCESS WEIGHT** to take the strain off joints.  
● **TAKE COD LIVER OIL** It contains anti-inflammatory

essential fats plus vitamin D for strong bones.  
● **TRY GREEN-LIPPED MUSSEL EXTRACT** Trials found it can be good for your joints and ease arthritic pain.

WORDS SORAYA MADELL PHOTOGRAPH ALAMY

take the stairs. Start gently and listen to your body. If you're in pain or very breathless, stop.'

You also need to fuel up properly for exercise. A good diet, with plenty of fruit and vegetables, will provide the vital nutrients. 'It's important that older people get sufficient protein for their muscles, from lean red meat, fish and eggs,' says Professor Rennie. 'The diets of many elderly people are deficient in vitamin D, calcium and vitamin B1 (thiamine) too, so take a good multi-vitamin supplement.'

When starting out or increasing your activity levels, find something you enjoy and do it regularly. Variety means you're likely to cover the key elements of stamina, strength, flexibility and balance. Activities that improve stamina work your lungs and heart, and include anything from cycling to digging in the garden. They help burn calories and combat conditions such as heart disease. Strength exercises that tone your muscles mean you'll be able to do tasks such as carry heavy shopping. They'll also help support your back and the joints in your ankles and knees so you'll be less likely to fall. Anything that focuses on flexibility and balance will keep you on your feet.

'One of the best things you can do is go to a keep-fit class with an instructor trained in exercises for older people,' advises Dr Skelton. 'These classes have all-round benefits,

focusing on stamina, strength and flexibility.' Strength training is important to stop your muscles wasting away. Anything that creates resistance – pulling or pushing against the muscles – will help, including aqua-aerobics, resistance machines in a gym or using bags of rice as dumbbells at home. A simple strength exercise is to sit in a chair with your arms folded, slowly raise yourself up out of the chair, hold for a few seconds, then sit down slowly.

### BUILD UP YOUR BONES

Strong bones and muscles will prevent you falling. Any weight-bearing exercise, such as tennis, a keep-fit class, jogging or brisk walking, will be beneficial. Activities that involve changing direction, such as a step class, racquet sports or even dancing, are especially good for building bone density, but don't overdo it. Exercising outside has the added benefit of topping up your vitamin D levels from the sun. Try yoga, Pilates or tai chi – they don't do much for bones, but improve flexibility, balance and help lengthen and protect the spine.

Whatever you choose, aim for at least 30 minutes a day. 'And get on the floor more,' adds Dr Skelton. 'Many older people are scared to do this but it keeps you flexible. Next time the grandchildren come round, play on the floor with them.'

**● For over-50s classes, contact your local council, leisure centre or YMCA.**

**● Age Concern and Help the Aged provide exercise leaflets. Log on to [www.ageconcern.org.uk](http://www.ageconcern.org.uk) or [www.helptheaged.org.uk](http://www.helptheaged.org.uk).**

**● The British Heart Foundation has exercise advice at [www.bhfactive.org.uk](http://www.bhfactive.org.uk).**

**● For advice on improving balance, see [www.balancetraining.org.uk](http://www.balancetraining.org.uk).**



**Just 12 weeks of strength training will reverse 20 years of muscle loss.**

### 5 WAYS TO AVOID FALLS AT HOME

- 1** Make sure all floor surfaces are non-slip and securely fixed.
- 2** Arrange furniture so you can move around easily.
- 3** Take extra care on stairs and steps, and use the handrail.
- 4** Remove clutter from the hallway and stairs, and make sure they are well lit.
- 5** Check for trailing wires from electrical appliances.