

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Senior Care

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Starting an exercise program: What do seniors need?

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If you didn't realize that September was Healthy Aging Month, there's still time to educate yourself and apply that knowledge to a healthy outlook for the months and years ahead. Addressing and managing health concerns allows us to set aside fears and fully embrace the positive aspects of growing older.

We recognize and have heard time and again that the key to staying healthy is proper diet and exercise. But "exercise" can be quite vague to those who encounter age-related physical obstacles or have never been part of a fitness regimen. Few activities are more important to senior health than those which help improve balance, flexibility, strength and endurance, so it's essential to pay attention to proper form and body capability to achieve our healthiest self.

Gyms and fitness centers offer a fantastic jumping-off point for any exercise plan, as trained professionals can give recommendations for personalized exercises. If an exercise program of any sort is new to you, be sure to make your doctor aware of your plans, and don't be afraid to let him or her guide you in the right direction.

Of course, exercise does not have to entail a trip out of the home. Simple practices around the house can help improve balance or strength without disrupting daily routine. Standing up from a chair or walking up stairs can improve a sense of balance and build muscle strength when practiced and repeated. Even bending over to pick something up can be beneficial.

In addition to building strength and balance, endurance exercises are important to maintaining heart health and metabolism. This can mean anything from raking leaves to going for a bike ride – it's simply important to increase the heart rate. And for seniors with joint problems, few exercises are better than swimming. As a low-impact, low-risk activity, swimming allows seniors to access all of the challenges and benefits of exercise while easing strain on problematic areas.

It's also good to remember that keeping the mind active and attentive is just as important as physical health, often driving the body's overall health. Some of the best exercises for both body and mind are derived from Eastern cultures and have been adapted over decades to worldwide reception. Because of its gradual pace, tai chi is an excellent practice for older adults. Yoga has many different forms, but all include a two-fold approach: holding and maintaining a series of postures while focusing on breathing. Before attending just any yoga class, make sure it is specifically tailored for older adults to ensure comfort and safety.

I can say over and over how important it is to our physical wellness to practice balance, strength, endurance and stretching, but perhaps the ultimate benefit of exercise programs is an increase in self confidence. This helps alleviate several fears seniors may have, whether it's of falling or of not being able to complete a task. As the senior population increases over the next decade, we'll be grateful to have strong, capable elders to learn from.

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