

## **You're Never Too Old to Exercise**

(HealthDayNews) -- One of the best ways to ward off health problems as you age is the same as when you're young, health experts say -- exercise.

"Most of the issues we look at as aging really are disuse. We're meant to move," said Colin Milner, CEO of the International Council on Active Aging, an umbrella group of about 4,000 organizations that deal with aging populations.

"Exercising is the closest thing to a 'magic bullet,' to ensure longevity and a good quality of life," he said.

But try selling that to those 65 and older, most of whom are too sedentary for their own good, says James Blumenthal, a professor of medical psychology at Duke University Medical School, who has conducted a number of studies that link exercise to a drop in depression and a reduced risk of a second heart attack.

"There is good evidence that older people respond just as well to exercise as younger people do, but most older people don't exercise," he said.

One reason could be health, acknowledged Milner, who noted that 85 percent of people over 65 have some health problem that could deter them from exercising. Another problem: people are often more focused on external anti-aging remedies than on staying fit.

"Of the \$29 billion spent annually on anti-aging, most is spent on external things, like Botox and breast implants," Milner said. "None of this impacts inner health. The challenge is to help people realize that they should focus on prevention rather than perfection."

Fortunately, a growing number of organizations are starting to preach the gospel of exercise to older adults. Milner reports that his Active Aging Council has nearly doubled its membership in one year, from 2,500 to more than 4,000 organizations representing everything from assisted-living facilities to military hospitals to corporate fitness centers, and one of their primary goals is to increase physical activity among older individuals.

Blumenthal said the medical community is paying increasing attention to the importance of exercise for older people, even the elderly.

"In the last 10 years, I've seen many more studies that reflect the benefits of exercise in reducing the risk of a wide range of medical disorders," Blumenthal said, from heart disease to depression to the effect of gall bladder surgery.

Besides trimming the risk of assorted ailments, he added, exercise has been shown to increase weight loss, and improve self-confidence and physical condition so the daily activities of living are much easier to perform.

Despite all this good news about how exercise can improve the lives of older individuals, the key is to motivate folks to get moving.

For people inclined to exercise, Milner said, "The number one motivator for exercise is turning 50 itself, as people are interested in staying healthy."

For those less likely to be self-starters, Milner said their doctors can help.

"Fifty-two percent of doctors tell their patients to exercise, but only 14 percent actually prescribe it," he said. "The message should be that exercise is not an option. It should be done as part of your routine, like brushing teeth."

Another way to encourage exercise is to explain how exercise can keep people independent.

"The number one reason why older adults need assisted living is lack of leg strength -- they can't get out of a chair, walk up stairs

or function on their own," Milner said. So, if they start exercising -- only 11 percent of older people do strength training -- they'll be much more likely to live independently, carry their groceries, and play with their grandchildren.

They'll also save money. According to Milner, people 50 and older who get 90 minutes of physical activity a week could save \$2,200 a year on medical bills, ranging from doctors visits to prescription drugs.

If you're older and have fallen out of the exercise habit, your first move should be to the doctor, Blumenthal said. The visit should include a stress test and a review of medications you're taking because certain drugs can affect physical abilities; beta blockers, for instance, slow down the heart rate, he said.

Once your doctor has approved you for exercise, get moving. And, Blumenthal added, "You don't have to train for a marathon."

"Modest exercise of 30 minutes a day every day is more important than the intensity," he said.

More information

The National Institutes of Health has lots of information on exercise for older adults.

By Janice Billingsley

SOURCES: James Blumenthal, Ph.D., professor, medical psychology, Duke University Medical Center, Durham, N.C.; Colin Milner, CEO, International Council on Active Aging, Vancouver, B.C.

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