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The Aging Baby Boom

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By 2025, more than 25 per cent of Canadians will be older than 65.

Many of the physical and psychological declines associated with aging are avoidable. The disabling factors once attributed to aging are now thought to be a result of a sedentary lifestyle.

Health, functional capacity, quality of life and independence take an added importance for the older adult. A properly designed fitness program including the components of strength, endurance, balance and flexibility can help slow down or even reverse the aging process.

The bad news is, as the body ages, cardiovascular function decreases five to 15 per cent per decade after the age of 25. Muscle mass decreases by nearly 50 per cent between ages 20 - 90. And every year 30 to 50 per cent of people over the age of 65 fall, and many never completely recover. Twenty-five per cent of hip fracture patients never regain their previous level of independence and 10 per cent die from fracture complications. Flexibility also declines with age, peaking in the mid to late 20's. Psychological changes also occur which affect memory, attention, reaction time, with depression being the most frequently reported mental health disorder in older adults.

The good news is all that is required is a moderate amount of exercise. But if your activities are exclusively aerobic (walking, jogging, swimming, cycling etc.), that's not enough.

Although aerobic exercise is essential for strengthening the heart, thereby preventing heart disease, its effect on muscle size and strength is minimal. Resistance training also known as strength or weight training is required to preserve muscle.

By using resistance that challenges our tissues, we can improve muscle strength and/or endurance. Resistance training increases functional strength and even at advanced ages has been proven to have a much greater impact on daily living than aerobic exercise.

Many research studies on strength training for the elderly show that resistance training can produce significant increases in muscle, bone and connective tissue strength as well as contributing to improvements in balance and co-ordination, resulting in greater enjoyment and quality of life.

Resistance training also raises metabolism (the rate at which the body burns calories to fuel basic body functions), increases bone density, decreases the risk of adult onset diabetes and enhances the immune system.

Balance is essential in everyday life. Static and dynamic balances are needed to maneuver around objects, walk on unseen surfaces and reach for things in all directions and heights. Balance is a skill that must be constantly practiced to preserve. When we balance train, we learn to centre our weight-bearing joints on top of each other, leading to more efficient movement, sparing joints from excessive wear and tear and saving energy.

By including some routine fitness exercises in your workout that are specifically geared towards improving balance and posture; falls, the leading cause of injury for older adults, can in many cases be prevented.

Some balance exercises include lunges or walking fast and stepping over objects, lateral movements on a low balance beam, standing on one leg, and using unstable apparatus such as a fitness ball, wobble board or trampoline. Start slowly by incorporating five to 10 minutes of balance training into your program and do not practice exercises that are too challenging for you without the help of fitness professional.

Flexibility is an equally important component of the fitness program as it relieves joint stiffness, increases circulation to the arms and legs, and minimizes postural problems and lower back pain. Taking part in a hatha yoga or TaiChi class offers gradual and consistent balance and flexibility training as well as constant correction of body alignment.

There is no other population that can benefit from physical activity more than seniors and it's never too late to start.

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