

You Are Never Too Old to Exercise

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(HealthNewsDigest.com)...A growing body of research shows the benefits of exercise are just as significant for those in their 70s and beyond as for younger persons, according to Duke University Medical Center researchers, who believe regular exercise can in fact slow or even reverse some of the effects of aging that were once thought to be inevitable.

James Blumenthal, Ph.D., Duke professor of medical psychology, said regular physical activity for seniors benefits both mind and body.

"Exercise improves psychological functioning, in terms of reducing symptoms of distress, anxiety and depression," said Blumenthal, whose own work has investigated the comparative benefits of exercise and medication on depression. "In addition, exercise has been shown to improve self-esteem and self-confidence.

"We also see clear benefits of exercise on physical functioning. It reduces the risk for cardiovascular disease, lowers cholesterol, builds bone density and lowers the risk of osteoporosis. There's a suggestion that it lowers blood pressure, and even data to suggest that the risk of having gallstones is reduced with exercise."

Blumenthal said exercise can also benefit patients with existing medical conditions. "If you have cardiovascular disease, it lowers the risk of having further heart complications. For patients who have osteoarthritis, it improves their functional ability and reduces levels of pain."

One of the messages Blumenthal and other researchers in the field want to send to seniors is that the physical activity they chose does not have to be intensive to realize meaningful health benefits. "You don't need to run a marathon," he said. "You'll see benefits from walking, biking and other simple activities."

Unfortunately, older Americans, like the rest of our population, aren't getting enough exercise. Blumenthal said the current recommendation is to try and get at least some aerobic exercise every day or almost every day. He says 30 minutes a day, five days a week, is optimal.

Research also shows exercise can help lower health care costs for America's aging population. Regular physical activity can facilitate weight loss and weight management, and can help regulate blood sugar levels to control type 2 diabetes. Obesity and diabetes are two of America's most serious public health problems, Blumenthal said.

"It's never too late to start exercising," he said. "Exercise can help an older person improve their physical fitness, muscle strength and aerobic capacity, as well as their mood and cognitive abilities. There was a belief a number of years ago that beyond a certain age, people wouldn't get the same benefits from exercise as a younger person would. Now we know that's not the case."