

Age is but a NUMBER

THE EFFECTS OF EXERCISE ON THOSE
IN THEIR 60s AND BEYOND MIGHT
NOT BE APPARENT, BUT THERE ARE A
HOST OF BENEFITS FOR GETTING ACTIVE.

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THERE ARE VARIOUS REASONS

why senior citizens in their 60s and beyond might be apprehensive about getting into a fitness routine. The fear of falling or aggravating a chronic ailment are valid reasons indeed. However, being sedentary and avoiding exercise altogether can be even more detrimental, both mentally and physically.

Inactive people young and old are nearly twice as likely to develop heart disease than those who are active. Sedentary older folks can develop sarcopenia (a condition that affects many once they are past their 50s) more rapidly than their active counterparts. The most common symptom associated with sarcopenia is the loss of muscle mass at the rate of around 1 to 2 per cent annually. The bodies of sarcopenia sufferers become weaker and slower over time.

While exercise presents some risk of injury, the pros of working out in one's golden years far outweigh the cons. Not only does regular physical activity reduce the chances of developing chronic conditions like arthritis, heart disease, diabetes or high blood pressure, it can even help reverse them. In addition, exercise strengthens the lower body, which improves balance and mobility, which in turn reduces the risk of falls that in elderly people often lead to major fractures.



Getting Started

Easing into a fitness routine need not be difficult, and it doesn't need a high-impact activity to get the limbs moving. For example, a moderate-intensity aerobic exercise like brisk-walking improves cardiovascular health and can be done almost anywhere. Getting the heart pumping in this way improves blood circulation and burns calories — and aids in maintaining an ideal body weight which lowers the risk of age-related conditions such as heart disease and stroke.

For those concerned about pushing themselves too hard, gauging the degree of intensity is simple. "To evaluate your level of perceived exertion, see if you can communicate in three- to four-word sentences during the workout," suggests Mr Kwok Boon Chong, Senior Physiotherapist from Clinical Services in the National Healthcare Group Polyclinics. "If you experience chest discomfort, reduce your intensity to a point where you can communicate in full sentences of around eight to 10 words during the workout."

It is also important to incorporate muscle-strengthening exercises, particularly for the lower limbs, in order to maintain mobility and manage joint problems like



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NOT YOUR USUAL WORKOUT

There are a growing number of more interesting options available to seniors these days.

» ZUMBA GOLD

Zumba Gold is a Latin-inspired dance fitness programme specially tailored for the 'active ager' or those who want to start an exercise routine. Participants coordinate their movements to catchy Latin beats but with less intensity than the standard Zumba moves. Benefits include improved balance, coordination and stamina. Sign up for lessons at a Community Club, which can be located at www.pa.gov.sg/locate-our-centres

» AQUAROBICS

This low-impact exercise takes participants through aerobic exercises in the shallow end of a swimming pool — so swimming knowledge isn't necessary. With water supporting the body's weight, the risk of muscle and joint injury are reduced, while the water's resistance helps build up muscle endurance and burn calories. Check out www.viriya.org.sg/mycentre/_html/ourprogrammes.html for classes.

» PÉTANQUE

In this French sport, players score by throwing balls as close to the target as possible. It's not an aerobic sport, but requires stamina as play can last several hours. It trains hand-eye coordination and keeps the mind active with strategy and teamwork. Pétanque is also suitable for seniors with mobility difficulties as little movement is required. Visit www.sportsboules.org.sg for more information on classes.

osteoarthritis in the knees. "If you are an older person, a basic but useful exercise would be to try to stand from a seated position without supporting yourself with your arms. Try and do this 10 times for three sets," says Mr Kwok. "This exercise can also help ascertain your level of physical ability."

A combination of aerobic and lower limb strengthening exercise would be 'walking' in waist- to chest-deep water in the swimming pool. This is useful for those with severe joint pain. Water has 12 times the resistance of air, so walking through it in the same way you would on land builds and strengthens muscle. Furthermore, water has the property of buoyancy that can reduce joint pressure. The deeper the water, the more strenuous the workout. A good idea would be to wear a flotation belt to keep the body upright.

Moving Along

Seniors with limited mobility or who require a wheelchair can still exercise. For example, they could use an upper-limb ergometer,

an exercise machine that works like an exercise cycle but is specifically for the arms. Depending on the intensity and duration of each set, the user can build upper-body strength and cardiovascular fitness.

But arguably, the biggest hindrance to exercise among seniors — especially those who haven't worked out in ages — is a lack of motivation, with reasons like "I'm too old" or "I need my rest" being commonplace. "In such situations, signing up for group exercises like social dances might benefit such individuals," says Mr Kwok. "The opportunity to interact with others would be a stronger motivating factor."

Regardless of the activity, however, it is important to remember that anyone planning on embarking on any fitness regime should consult a doctor to ensure that it is safe to do so. Similar advice is recommended for those who want to change their diet in a bid to lose weight.

In the presence of medical conditions like heart disease or diabetes, a dietitian's advice should be sought before modifying one's diet. **lw**