

HEALTHY BODIES, HEALTHY MINDS:

Comfort Keepers Provides Tips to Help Seniors Stay Active from 'Head to Toe'

What's the secret to a long and healthy life? While scientific research says genetics plays a role, lifestyle has also shown to have a significant impact on how healthy you are and how long you live. That includes not only how often you exercise your body, but also how frequently you exercise your mind. Below are tips that can help the senior in your life maintain a healthy body and healthy mind:

How To Exercise Your Mind:

Just as physical activity keeps your body strong, mental activity can help your mind remain sharp and alert. In fact, according to a recent 2003 *New England Journal of Medicine* study, active seniors overall had a 63 percent lower risk of developing dementia compared with people who were less active. Here are several simple, lifestyle activities that keep minds active, thus reducing the chances of memory loss:

- Play memory enhancing games such as Scrabble®, crossword puzzles and word searches
- Read books and magazines of interest
- Tell jokes, laugh and answer riddles
- Learn to play a musical instrument or how to touch type
- Stay informed about current events both local and national
- Volunteer in your local community, such as charity events, children's hospitals, church or synagogue groups, etc.
- Start a new hobby, such as knitting, gardening, wood working or fly fishing
- Learn a foreign language or master a new gadget such as a ham radio or computer
- Interact with family and friends frequently; maintain a healthy social life
- Build a small model car or plane, be creative
- Use leisure time to watch the stars, learn to cook or try something new such as wine tasting

Tips On Staying Physically Active

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Aging (AOA), one in three men and one in two women are not physically active.

Exercise isn't just for younger seniors, who live independently and are able to go on brisk walks. Many people 90 or older, who have become physically frail from inactivity, can more than double their strength through simple exercises in a fairly short amount of time. For some, that can mean the difference between getting up from a chair by themselves versus having to depend on someone to help them. In one study, some people 80 and older progressed from using walkers to using canes after doing simple muscle-building exercises for just 10 weeks.

For seniors, staying physically active can provide numerous benefits, including better sleep, more energy, weight control and relief from stress and depression. Research has also shown that at least 30 minutes of physical activity five or more days a week can also help prevent colds and other illness and provide relief from arthritis, as well as strengthen bones and muscles and lower the risks of diabetes, heart disease, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and colon cancer.

The following are some simple ways to stay physically active. These exercises have been broken down into four categories- endurance, strength, balance, and flexibility. **Always check with a physician or another health care professional before participating in any physical activities.**

Endurance exercises – Endurance exercises are activities that increase an individual's heart rate and breathing for an extended period of time. Examples of moderate endurance activities for the average older adult include swimming and water aerobics, brisk walks, cycling, and even everyday activities such as gardening and potting plants or mopping the floor.

Guidelines:

- Older adults should build up their endurance gradually, starting out with as little as five minutes of endurance activities at a time. It may take months to go from a very long-standing sedentary lifestyle to doing some of the activities described above.
- Endurance activities should not make a senior breathe so hard that it makes it difficult for them to talk. They should also not cause dizziness or chest pain.
- Always stretch after endurance activities, when muscles become warm.
- Drink plenty of liquids to avoid dehydration.

Strength exercises – Strength exercises build muscle and allow seniors to do more activities on their own. Even very small increases in muscle can make a big difference in ability, such as getting up from a chair or climbing stairs. Strength exercises also increase metabolism, helping to keep a senior's weight and blood pressure stable. This is very important because obesity and diabetes are major health problems for older adults.

There are a number of exercises seniors can perform in the comfort of their own home that can help them improve their strength. Examples include the following:

Arm Raise – Strengthens shoulder muscles

1. Sit in armless chair with your back supported by back of chair.
2. Keep feet flat on floor even with your shoulders.
3. Hold hand weights straight down at your sides, with palms facing inward.
4. Raise both arms to side, shoulder height.
5. Hold the position for 1 second.
6. Slowly lower arms to sides. Pause.
7. Repeat 8 to 15 times.
8. Rest; then do another set of 8 to 15 repetitions.

Chair Stand- Strengthens muscles in abdomen and thighs

1. Place pillows on the back of chair.
2. Sit toward front of chair, knees bent, feet flat on floor.
3. Lean back on pillows in a half-reclining position. Keep your back and shoulders straight throughout exercise.
4. Raise upper body forward until sitting upright, using hands as little as possible (or not at all, if you can). Your back should no longer lean against pillows.
5. Slowly stand up, using hands as little as possible.
6. Slowly sit back down. Pause.
7. Repeat 8 to 15 times.
8. Rest; then do another set of 8 to 15 repetitions.

Guidelines:

- Start out with a low amount of weight (or no weight) and increase it gradually.
- Strength enduring exercises may cause soreness at first, but should never cause pain.
- Remember to stretch after strength exercises.

Balance exercises – Balance exercises help prevent a common problem in older adults – falls. Falling is a major cause of broken hips and other injuries that often lead to disability and loss of independence. In fact, according to the National Institute on Aging, U.S. hospitals have 300,000 admissions yearly for broken hips, and falling often causes those fractures.

Many balance and strength exercises overlap, serving both purposes. Below are some examples of balance exercises that can be done at anytime, anywhere.

1. Walk heel-to-toe. Position your heel just in front of the toes of the opposite foot each time you take a step. Your heel and toes should touch or almost touch.
2. Stand on one foot (for example, while waiting in line at the grocery store or at the bus stop). Alternate feet.
3. Stand up and sit down without using your hands.

Guidelines:

- Seniors should not do more than their regularly scheduled strength exercise sessions to incorporate balance modifications.
- Doing too many strength/balance exercises can cause more harm than good.

Flexibility Exercises – Flexibility exercises help keep muscles limber. Physical therapists and other health professionals often recommend certain stretching exercises to help patients recover from injuries and to prevent injuries in the first place. Flexibility can also play a part in preventing falls.

Examples of exercises that improve flexibility include the following,

Hamstrings Stretch - Stretches muscles in the back of the thigh

1. Stand behind chair, holding the back of it with both hands.
2. Bend forward from the hips (not waist), keeping back and shoulders straight at all times.
3. When upper body is parallel to floor, hold position for 10 to 30 seconds. You should feel a stretch in the backs of your thighs.
4. Repeat 3 to 5 times.

Ankle Stretch - Stretches front ankle muscles.

1. Remove your shoes. Sit toward the front edge of a chair and lean back, using pillows to support your back.
2. Stretch legs out in front of you.
3. With your heels still on the floor, bend ankles to point feet toward you.
4. Bend ankles to point feet away from you.
5. If you don't feel the stretch, repeat with your feet slightly off the floor.
6. Hold the position for 1 second.
7. Repeat 3 to 5 times.

Guidelines:

- Do stretching exercises after endurance and strength exercises, when the muscles are the warmest.
- Use slow, steady movements during stretches. Jerking into a position can cause muscles to tighten, possibly resulting in injury.
- Stretching may cause mild discomfort, but should not cause pain.

For more ideas on how to stay physically and mentally fit, additional resources include:

- 1) **American Association for Retired Persons** – www.aarp.org - AARP is dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for people age 50 and over. The Web site provides information on a variety of topics, including a wide selection of articles on fitness and health.
- 2) **Administration on Aging** – www.aoa.gov – The AOA is one of the largest providers of home and community based care for older persons and their caregivers. The AOA Web site has an entire section dedicated to promoting healthy lifestyles.
- 3) **National Institutes of Health** – www.nihseniorhealth.gov – The Web site offers older adults aging-related health information. The site was developed by the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine; both are part of the National Institutes of Health.
- 4) **Fifty Plus Lifelong Fitness** – www.50plus.org – Fifty Plus Lifelong Fitness is a non-profit organization whose mission is to promote an active lifestyle for older people. The Web site offers articles on the topics of aging, health and exercise.