Active aging

Physical therapists are exercise experts, providing services for a wide range of people to optimise their physical ability. They prescribe exercise as part of a structured, safe, and effective programme.

An important part of their role is to help people remain active as they age. More than any other profession, physical therapists (known in many countries as physiotherapists) prevent and treat chronic disease and disability in aging adults through specifically prescribed activity and movement.

The World Health Organization encourages regular physical activity for older adults, because it has been shown to improve the functional status and quality of life in this group of individuals. (www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/factsheet_olderadults/en/)

It says that older adults should engage in at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity five days a week, if appropriate.


This document provides information and resources demonstrating the contribution of physical therapists in keeping people active as they age, particularly their role in maintaining general health, preventing and treating cardiovascular disease, and countering joint problems. A separate clinical area sheet is available dealing specifically with cardiovascular disease.

Improving functional ability

Older adults engaged in regular physical activity demonstrate improved:

- balance
- strength
- coordination and motor control
- flexibility
- endurance.
As a result, physical activity can reduce the risk of falls – a major cause of disability among older people.

Source: World Health Organization, “Physical activity and older adults”
www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/factsheet_olderadults/en/

Participation in regular exercise programmes leads to older adults having higher levels of functional capabilities, greater independence, and improved quality of life.


Exercise programmes can slow down functional decline. Elderly adults can, with an appropriate exercise programme, be helped to achieve levels of activity that will bring health benefits, and the decline in overall function that might normally be expected with age can be substantially retarded.


Physical activity and exercise are inversely associated with mortality and age-related morbidity.


Preventing and treating non-communicable disease

Participation in regular physical activity can prevent or improve many non-communicable diseases prevalent in older adults:

- cardiovascular disease (coronary heart disease, stroke)
- hypertension (elevated blood pressure, which can contribute to cardiovascular disease)
- osteoarthritis (a disease that causes joint swelling, pain and limits movement)
- osteoporosis (a disease in which bones become fragile)

www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/factsheet_olderadults/en/

Being active from an early age can help prevent these non-communicable diseases, and regular movement and activity can also help relieve the disability and pain associated with them.

www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/factsheet_olderadults/en/
Promoting cardiovascular health

Regular exercise in older adults has many positive effects on cardiovascular health, including increasing cardiac output, maximum heart rate, endurance, and arterial blood flow, and decreasing heart rate, blood pressure, and risk of heart disease.


One study found that after eight months of regular training, a group of 85-year-olds had increased walking speed and increased maximal oxygen uptake and decreased blood pressure. This resulted in reduced health risk and improved independence.


Improving joint health

Tai Chi exercise brings improved balanced and physical functioning to people with osteoarthritis.


Research indicates that exercise decreases pain and increases ability to exercise in people with osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis.


Land-based therapeutic exercise programmes have been shown to reduce pain and improve physical function in people with osteoarthritis of the knee.


For people with osteoarthritis of the knee, both high intensity and low intensity aerobic exercise (stationary cycling) are equally effective at improving functional status, gait, pain, and aerobic capacity.

Research also indicates that regular exercise by people with arthritis decreases the likelihood of developing disability by 10% and protects against functional decline.


Improving mental health

Physical activity has been shown to improve mental health and cognitive function in older adults and contributes to the management of disorders, such as depression and anxiety. Active lifestyles often provide older persons with regular occasions to make new friendships, maintain social networks, and interact with other people of all ages.

www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/factsheet_olderadults/en/

Research has indicated that increased levels of physical activity reduces the risk of Alzheimer’s disease. Exercise, along with cognitively stimulating activities, can reduce some of the symptoms of the disease.


Aerobic exercises significantly reduced depressive symptoms in people over 60.


A regular programme of aerobic exercise can slow or reverse functional deterioration, reducing the individual’s biological age by 10 or more years, and potentially prolonging independence.


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