

Article about physical therapists helping people become fit at every age

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Movement and exercise are fundamental to leading a healthy, happy life – whatever age you may be. The World Health Organization says that inactivity is one of the leading preventable causes of death worldwide, and has made physical activity a public health priority.

Lack of exercise is a significant risk factor for chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs) like heart disease, stroke, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases, and diabetes – which now make up 60% of all deaths. Not only that, but lack of exercise can cause lasting disability.

The profession of physical therapy, known in some countries as physiotherapy, helps millions of people every year to prevent and manage the effects of NCDs, along with the effects of inactive lifestyles, aging, illness, accidents, and the stresses and strains of life.

Physical therapists specialise in human movement and physical activity. They identify physical and other factors that prevent people from being as active and independent as they can be, and then they find ways of overcoming them.

Every year on 8th September, physical therapists around the world use World Physical Therapy Day to draw attention to the contribution the profession can make to the health of individuals and nations. The message is “Movement for Health”. This year we’re promoting the message that keeping fit is an investment for the future, no matter how old you are. We want people to be “Fit for the future”.

For aging adults, there’s nearly always potential to build for a healthier happier future. I conduct workshops around the world, demonstrating how aging adults and patients with chronic health problems can improve their health by learning how to exercise safely under the guidance and instruction of physical therapists.

The effects of aging, unfortunately, begin in our 30s and we decline thereafter unless we maintain a healthy lifestyle. As we age fat mass increases and aerobic capacity and muscle mass decrease if we don't get enough exercise. This means less oxygen is delivered to key organs, making daily exercise even more difficult. Routine daily activity can break the cycle, reverse the decline, and lead to a longer life.

Studies have shown that older adults engaged in regular physical activity demonstrate improved balance, strength, coordination, motor control, flexibility and endurance. Research also shows how effective physical therapists are at treating and preventing back pain, joint problems, balance disorders, strength decline – and reducing high blood pressure and obesity.

At the other end of the age range, physical activity is vitally important in children. Childhood obesity is a significant risk factor for asthma, musculoskeletal problems and depression as well as other NCDs. Physical inactivity and poor posture in children can also cause musculoskeletal problems that have a legacy long into adult life.

But if children participate in physical activity they can head off many of these conditions. Physical therapists can help them overcome physical problems that may restrict their ability to move.

Physical activity doesn't just mean more healthy people, but happier more productive people, whether young or aging. It's time for all of us to be fit for the future.

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