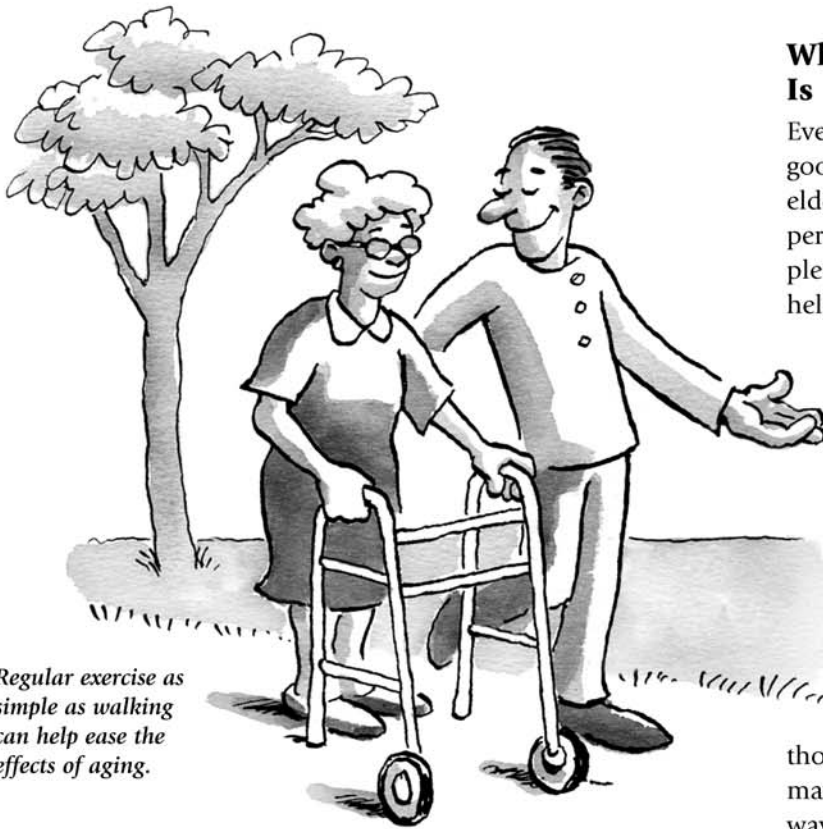


The Importance of Exercise

No matter how old we are, our bodies benefit from physical activity. Study after study has shown that exercise—even in moderate amounts—can make us more flexible and strong, reduce our risk for heart disease and diabetes, and minimize the symptoms of diseases such as arthritis.

Whether we want to do something more strenuous, such as bicycling or running, or less strenuous, such as walking, exercise will help us feel better and help ease the effects of aging. It can even help us live longer.

For more sedentary or confined elders, regular physical activity or some kind of mobility is important to protect aging blood vessels. This is critical because, if a patient is bedridden or primarily inactive, blood pools in the veins and can create clots or blockages that can travel to the brain, heart or lungs, resulting in stroke or death.



Regular exercise as simple as walking can help ease the effects of aging.

What Kind of Fitness Program Is Best?

Even simple and small amounts of activity are good for us. If you are the caregiver for an elderly person, try to make exercise part of that person's daily routine. Even something as simple as walking around the house or yard can help boost self-confidence and contribute to an overall sense of well-being. If he or she is capable, try to schedule several periods for aerobic exercise every week.

To get the most health benefits, a person's workouts should ideally consist of warming up and stretching for several minutes, aerobic exercising for 30 minutes, and cooling down for 2 to 3 minutes.

Warming up and stretching are important to prepare the muscles for exercise. Stretching all the muscles—including those in the legs, arms, and torso—gives us the maximum benefit from a workout. Yoga is one way to incorporate stretching and flexibility into an exercise routine.

Encourage the person you are caring for to choose something that he or she likes. For seniors, one of the best forms of exercise is the stationary recumbent bicycle. Unlike upright bicycles, the recumbent kind provides support for your back. And unlike walking or running, biking does not put undue stress on the knees and ankles.

Other activities like swimming, walking, throwing, stretching and gardening are simpler and generally provide a good overall workout for seniors less able to accomplish more challenging physical tasks.

How to Begin

For a senior just beginning a fitness program, have the patient thoroughly evaluated by a doctor for an exercise plan. Try looking for established senior fitness programs in the area. Many senior centers, hospitals, YMCAs, YWCAs and fitness clubs offer classes geared specifically toward seniors. In addition to being expertly designed around the needs of the elderly, these programs also provide an opportunity to socialize and receive moral support.

Before starting any fitness program, make sure to check with a doctor.