

Defying AGE



A Guide to Maintaining Mobility and Strength

By Megan Williamson, BA, CPT

Society has taught us to believe that as we age, we will get stiff and achy joints and decreased mobility. We'll gain weight. And physical activity will bring fatigue and pain.

How many times have you heard (or maybe even said yourself), “Oh, I’m old and that’s why I can’t do this or keep up with that?” I’m here to tell you that this just doesn’t need to be the case for you. Many people who are in the autumn season of life are regaining strength, maintaining mobility, decreasing aches and pains and even gaining lean muscle mass. I see it every day with my clients who are older adults.

Now, I’m not saying that your body is going to respond the same way in your 70s and 80s as it did in your 20s and 30s. But there needs to be a shift in our priorities in the later years of our life to maintain our independence and functionality, and for improvements to our overall health. Here are some practical strategies for maintaining strength, mobility and overall well-being well into your later years.

BALANCE

Our bodies rely on our balance systems all the time: walking, sitting tall in a chair, reaching for something high in a cupboard, and even as we step down the stairs. To improve our balance for these activities and for fall prevention, we need to actively challenge our balance. When you see kids playing at a playground, you see them practicing balance on ladders and ropes, through tunnels, and jumping off platforms. That's the cool thing about balance – we can improve it when we practice it!



Recommended Exercises Yoga, Thai Chi, and dancing are all great ways to help improve balance. Try peppering in some balance-specific exercises too. Create different stances like wide leg, tightrope stance, or perform an exercise on one leg. Another great way to improve balance is exercising with closed eyes (be sure to be near a stable support for safety). Incorporating visual movements with exercise can help improve the visual system which is a big component of our body's balance system. Going shoeless and starting with some toe and foot exercises can also help improve proprioception, another important aspect of the balance system.

AGILITY

You may think that agility is the domain of professional athletes but the truth is, we need to practice agility even more as we age. Agility is defined as “a rapid whole-body movement with change of velocity or direction in response to a stimulus.” To do that, our bodies require more muscle recruitment. We need brain reaction time to tell our body to quickly change direction – to avoid danger or a fall for example – but ultimately it's muscle ability to move our body quickly.

Recommended Exercises Gyms usually have agility ladders which are great for practicing lower body agility, or you can tape down an agility ladder shape on the floor – this can be a better option for

starters by eliminating a tripping hazard. A low step-up also works well, or use the bottom stair (make sure a railing is available for safety). Putting cones down on the floor (or outside at the park) and performing some quick movement changes back and forth to each cone is another fantastic agility exercise. Ball sports like basketball or tennis are great ways to practice agility, or even just throwing a ball back and forth.



DISCLAIMER: *The exercises mentioned in this article are suggestions based on general fitness principles. It's important to consult with a qualified healthcare professional or physician before starting any new exercise program, especially if you have any pre-existing health conditions or concerns. The information provided here is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always prioritize safety and listen to your body when engaging in physical activity.*



STRENGTH TRAINING

Muscle mass decreases anywhere between three and eight percent per decade after the age of 30. This rate is even higher after the age of 60. However, studies have also shown that with a regular strength training program, we can not only maintain muscle mass as we age, but we can actually (drum roll please) increase it!

Having adequate muscle mass is arguably one of the best things we can give ourselves for movement and independence throughout our life. Muscle acts as a support for our skeleton and can help preserve our bone density, especially if you are managing osteoporosis. There is no better type of exercise than resistance training to help build muscle and increase bone density.

Recommended Exercises Strength training for older adults should be done two to three times a week. Starting at a rep range of eight to 10 is usually a good starting point. Sets can be worked up to three to four per muscle group. If you want to use free weights, I recommend hiring a coach to help you learn the proper form to reduce the risk of injury.

Another option is to start in a pool, where the water acts as resistance at least two times that of air, depending on the movement. If you have osteoarthritis, vertical pool workouts (also known as standing water workouts or aqua aerobics) are one of the best ways to achieve low-impact resistance training. This has been shown to be more effective than swimming laps for some, especially if you can exercise in water that is above your shoulders.

WALKING

I believe walking to be one of the most underrated activities out there. Walking requires a lot of balance, but it also helps lubricate the joints of the hips, knees and spine. One of my rehab education teachers used to say “motion is lotion” and this is essentially what walking can do for our spine and joints. There is also a social component of walking, where we can participate in walk/run events within the community, catch up with friends on what I call “coffee walks” or spend time with our loved ones in nature. Remember, mental health is an important aspect of overall fitness too, and having social outlets and de-stressing strategies are important for healthy neural connections as well as strengthening our nervous system.

Recommended Exercises If able, we should walk every day. If you need walking poles, use them. Walk with friends, family and/or the dog. Try inclines for more of a challenge. But make sure to invest in proper footwear. If a walking program is new to you, start with just 10 minutes a day. As you get stronger, you can add minutes. You can also break up your walk times throughout the day to make them more manageable.



CARDIOVASCULAR TRAINING

Cardiovascular disease is on the rise, and the more sedentary we are the higher our risk becomes. This means that someone who uses a mobility device may be more at risk for heart disease than those who are ambulatory and weight-bear. That said, the good news is that we don't have to use our legs to create a good cardiovascular workout!

Recommended Exercises A lot of fitness facilities have adaptive cardiovascular equipment options. This can include Ski Erg machines, Row Erg machines, and even some handcycles or hand-bikes. If you use a manual wheelchair, try wheeling outside to get your heart rate up. Other options include activities like shadow boxing, hitting a speed bag, or even using a dowel at home and doing some seated dowel exercises (see website below).



MOBILITY

Generally, our joints need to be used to their full range to keep them pain-free and healthy. When we don't use something, we lose it. Think of a squat for example. If we don't spend any time squatting down to the floor, our hips, knees and ankles can become stiff, and our soft tissues can become "sticky" due to the lack of motion (remember, motion is lotion!). In the case of the squat, we can also lose stability from lack of muscle around the knee joint.

Recommended Exercises Moving often can help stimulate the lubrication in our joints instead of being reabsorbed. Try getting up and taking a walk, or doing some sit-to-stand exercising, every 30 minutes or so to avoid lengthy stillness or sitting. Use a timer to remind you to get up every 30 minutes or so if you need to.



Of course, there are aspects of aging that impact our bodies that we cannot control. But there are many things that we can do to offset these changes and maintain a healthy body. Remember that no matter what age you are, or where you are in your fitness journey, it is never too late to start making improvements for your joint health, muscle integrity, and balance.

For exercise ideas, workout programs or a consultation, visit oceanrehabandfitness.com.

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ABOUT OCEAN REHAB AND FITNESS:

Megan Williamson is a certified fitness coach through the National Academy of Sports Medicine and the head coach at Ocean Rehab and Fitness. Alongside her team, she offers adaptive training for those living with spinal cord injuries and many other physical disabilities. Her mission is to make exercise inclusive for everyone regardless of limitations.

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