

## From the Rocking Chair to the Squat Rack

### Getting older and getting ill aren't the same processes.

An old body workers' saying is "the body doesn't know age – it only knows abuse". What changes in our bodies should we expect with "normal" ageing? Are these changes reversible – or able to be kept from occurring? The article will attempt to shed the light on these questions. You'll get some ideas to help grandma keep fit enough to baby sit your kids well into her years, and some ideas to help keep you fit and active enough to enjoy your golden years.

### What causes the illnesses and injuries in the older population?

Research suggests that one of the largest problems facing the older adult is loss of muscle mass (sarcopenia). This particularly affects older women, but males show similar losses. A loss in muscle mass also causes a loss in strength. This loss in strength can be severe. One study reported that 40% of women aged 55-64 yr, and a staggering 65% of 75-84 yr olds didn't have the strength to lift a 4.5kg weight! Playing with your grandchildren, travelling with a suitcase, and doing grocery shopping won't be a reality for these folks. Many older people are so weak they don't have the strength to lower themselves into or get up out of a chair or walk up stairs. Falls and fractures are common – these can be serious, and even fatal in unwell, inactive older people. What causes sarcopenia? Simple – the use it or you'll lose it principle tells all. In western societies we seem to cherish the idea of graceful ageing. Taking a well-earned rest and relaxing in retirement is fine – but do it in between activities and strength training. A lack of physical activity and too much time in the rocking chair causes the loss in strength with ageing. This in turn makes it harder for people to be active leading to further strength losses. What we end up with is a vicious nasty downward spiral that leaves pop and gran unable to use their bodies to do normal life activities with ease. How can we reverse this downward spiral? Easy – get active and get strength training.

### The fountain of youth is at your local gymnasium

It's the one just by the dumbbell rack. Hopefully the fountain of youth at your gym has a water filter (this topic needs a whole article in itself). Strength training is superb for maintaining muscle mass – keeping sarcopenia from the door. Muscle is the tissue that burns most of the calories we consume – so expect to lose some weight, look and feel better once you start weight training. Bones also get stronger in response to weight training – this reduces the risks of serious injuries like hip fractures from falls. (See the next section for key exercises). These are just a few positive spin offs from weight training – there's lots more, but hopefully you're convinced this is the way to go by now. Keeping active and weight training will keep you in better condition for longer, but unfortunately part of being mortal is that aging is going to occur. Strength training does make a difference – and it's big. Studies have reported 200-300% gains in strength with 3-4 months of strength training. These gains are far greater than younger adults you expect to achieve. Likewise, gains of 10-30% in aerobic fitness have reported with prolonged endurance exercise in older populations. These are similar to those the younger population would expect. Walking, cycling, rowing, swimming, and group fitness classes are all neat ways to keep your ticker in good shape.

## **Key exercises for the older population**

### **Lunges**

Especially multi-directional lunges (lunging at different angles)  
These help with leg strength and balance  
An essential exercise to reduce the risk of injury from falling

### **Squats**

The “king” of leg strength exercises  
Aids in balance and flexibility  
Never get stuck in your armchair again

### **Overhead pushing and pulling exercises**

These may need to be paired up with exercises/stretchers that help straighten out the upper back and stretch around the shoulders  
People often forget these movements but life exists above head height

### **Specific core strengthening exercises**

The abdominal areas is the key area when it comes to moving well  
A specialist trainer may be required here to get the most value here  
Incontinence is a massive problem for the older population – specific abdominal training may be required here.

### **Upper body weights**

Aim for increasing muscle mass in these areas – don't worry you won't start looking like Arnold Schwarzenegger.  
Big pushing and pulling exercises are ideal.

### **Balance exercises**

Swiss ball, wobble board and duradisc exercises can be useful – especially for those who are exposed to slippery surfaces (ice, mud, wet floors) regularly  
Progress to more difficult levels slowly – falls shouldn't happen in the gym either.

A qualified personal trainer is ideal for getting you set up with a programme and goals to reach. A trained eye can accelerate your progress and tailor your programme to ensure that it suits your needs.

To conclude, aging is a natural process, but being injured from extreme inactivity and muscle weakness is not. The older body can show huge improvements in strength and fitness with weight training and aerobic activity. By being active and weight training you will extend your quality of life and be able to move around trouble free for longer. Happy training.