

Written by
Thursday, 03 April 2014 12:49



Strength training is an important part of an overall fitness program. Here's what strength training can do for you — and how to get started.

Want to reduce body fat, increase lean muscle mass and burn calories more efficiently? Strength training to the rescue! Despite its reputation as a "guy" or "jock" thing, strength training is a key component of overall health and fitness for everyone.

Use it or lose it

Muscle mass naturally diminishes with age.

"If you don't do anything to replace the lean muscle you lose, you'll increase the percentage of fat in your body," says Edward R. Laskowski, M.D., a physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn., and co-director of the Mayo Clinic Sports Medicine Center. "But strength training can help you preserve and enhance your muscle mass — at any age."

Strength training also helps you:

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- **Develop strong bones.** By stressing your bones, strength training increases bone density and reduces the risk of osteoporosis.
- **Control your weight.** As you gain muscle, your body begins to burn calories more efficiently. The more toned your muscles, the easier it is to control your weight.
- **Boost your stamina.** As you get stronger, you won't fatigue as easily. Building muscle also contributes to better balance, which can help you maintain independence as you age.
- **Manage chronic conditions.** Strength training can reduce the signs and symptoms of many chronic conditions, including back pain, arthritis, obesity, heart disease and diabetes.
- **Sharpen your focus.** Some research suggests that regular strength training helps improve attention for older adults.

Consider the options

Strength training can be done at home or in the gym. Common choices include:

- **Body weight.** You can do many exercises with little or no equipment. Try pushups, pullups, abdominal crunches and leg squats.
- **Resistance tubing.** Resistance tubing is inexpensive, lightweight tubing that provides resistance when stretched. You can choose from many types of resistance tubes in nearly any sporting goods store.
- **Free weights.** Barbells and dumbbells are classic strength training tools.
- **Weight machines.** Most fitness centers offer various resistance machines. You can also invest in weight machines for use at home.

Getting started

When you have your doctor's OK to begin a strength training program, choose a weight or resistance level heavy enough to tire your muscles after about 12 repetitions. When you can easily do more repetitions of a certain exercise, gradually increase the weight or resistance.

"On the 12th repetition, you should be just barely able to finish the motion," Dr. Laskowski says. "When you're using the proper weight or amount of resistance, you can build and tone muscle just as efficiently with a single set of 12 repetitions as you can with more sets of the same exercise."

To give your muscles time to recover, rest one full day between exercising each specific muscle group.

Also be careful to listen to your body. Although mild muscle soreness is normal, sharp pain and

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sore or swollen joints are signs that you've overdone it.

When to expect results

You don't need to spend hours a day lifting weights to benefit from strength training. "Two to three strength training sessions a week lasting just 20 to 30 minutes are sufficient for most people," Dr. Laskowski says.

Better yet, results are quick. Expect to enjoy noticeable improvements in your strength and stamina in just a few weeks. If you keep it up, you'll continue to increase your strength — even if you're not in shape when you begin.

Aerobic exercise

Regular aerobic exercise can help you live longer and healthier. After all, aerobic exercise reduces health risks, keeps excess pounds at bay, strengthens your heart and boosts your mood. Healthy adults should aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity — or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity — a week. That doesn't have to be all at one time, though. Aerobic exercise can even be done in 10-minute increments. So what are you waiting for?

For many people, walking is a great choice for aerobic exercise. In fact, walking is one of the most natural forms of exercise. It's safe, it's simple — and all it takes to get started is a good pair of walking shoes and a commitment to include aerobic exercise in your daily routine.

Of course, there's more to aerobic exercise than walking. Other popular choices include swimming, bicycling and jogging. Activities such as dancing and jumping rope count, too. Get creative.

Source: Mayo Clinic