

## Benefits of Strength Training

Exercise is important to achieving and sustaining your optimal health. While cardiovascular exercise may be popular (and for good reason: It helps to condition the heart and lungs, improves circulation, controls blood pressure, and increases endurance), strength training is just as vital to overall health. Strength training (also known as resistance training or weight-bearing exercise) offers benefits that cardiovascular exercise alone cannot offer. Learn more about strength training, what it can do for you and simple ways to incorporate it into your lifestyle.

### Why You Should Participate in Strength Training

As we get older, we lose muscle. Research indicates that after age 30, the average person loses approximately 10 percent of their muscle every decade. This can lead to a variety of health issues, such as a loss of balance, decreased muscle strength and loss of bone mass. Strength training helps to minimize these issues; it can even reverse some of these signs of aging. The result is a more fit body and body shape; better bodily functioning; and a lifestyle that, for most adults, is more enjoyable.

### Resistance Training Versus a Sedentary Lifestyle

Sometimes a sedentary lifestyle is due to a lack of energy, stemming from an inadequate diet, disease, not getting enough exercise or simply from the natural aging process. A sedentary lifestyle should not be accepted as another part of getting older: it can lead to a general decline in health, both mental and physical, resulting in complications such as type 2 diabetes, obesity and depression. By replacing a sedentary lifestyle with one that includes simple exercise routines, you can help to keep your body and mind strong.

If you tend to be sedentary, consider the lifestyle and health benefits strength training offers:

- **Lose fat:** A high amount of body fat brings a higher risk for developing diseases, cancers and other conditions, such as type 2 diabetes. Strength training helps to reduce fat levels by increasing the number of calories you burn through building muscle.
- **Regulate your health:** A scheduled resistance-training program helps to keep blood pressure, cholesterol levels and blood sugar levels in check. It also helps to improve your blood flow for increased energy and system functioning.
- **Improve your mental health:** Strength training helps to reduce stress, tension and anxiety. It can also reduce symptoms of depression.
- **Improve reflexes:** As we grow older, nerves may become less challenged; this can lead to lagging response times. Lifting weights helps to charge nerves, improving responsiveness.

- **Improve flexibility and stability:** Elders tend to have more falls than younger people. This is due to a decrease in flexibility and a loss of balance. Strength training combats these decreases by strengthening connective tissue and building more stable joints.
- **Stay healthy:** Regular physical activity helps the body recover after illness and helps reduce the symptoms of fatigue, depression and other disabilities commonly experienced by those who are ill.

## Finding a Strength-Training Routine

For maximum benefits, experts recommend a strength-training program that is balanced with a healthy diet and cardiovascular exercise. Your physician can offer tailored advice for your situation, but three 20-minute sessions per week can provide you with positive results. Use these suggestions when getting started on a strength-training routine:

- **Start your new program slowly:** You may not be able to do an entire resistance-training program the first time. However, you can still aim for your goals by slowly adding on to your routine over time.
- **Space out your strength-training sessions:** Although it may seem more efficient to do two sets in one session, research indicates that one set completed three times per week offers maximum benefits.
- **Incorporate strength training into your existing workout:** If you walk regularly, try jogging at a slow pace for one minute. Even a small amount of increased resistance can add bone mass.
- **Hire a personal trainer:** Many gyms offer a free introductory session with a trainer; if not, consider purchasing a package that will allow you to understand how to properly complete moves. Verify your trainer is certified and, if possible, hire one who is familiar with any conditions you may have.
- **Get a partner:** Having someone who relies on you (and vice versa) can get you to go to the gym, even when you do not want to. It can make a workout more enjoyable, as well.

## Strength-Training Benefits for Women

For women, strength training is especially important: it helps to preserve and increase bone density and mass. The loss of bone density and mass in women typically begins in the 30s; after menopause, the rate of bone loss increases dramatically, year after year. Eventually, this leads to osteoporosis, a condition that can result in bone fractures. Studies have shown that strength training helps to prevent the loss of bone mass while simultaneously encouraging bone mass gain.

If you have been diagnosed with osteoporosis, work with your physician on a strength-training routine that accommodates your needs and limitations. Consider the following:

- Use a stair climber, or walk on a slope. Both offer low-impact resistance exercises.
- Avoid abdominal crunches, especially if you have osteoporosis in your spine. Ask your doctor for recommendations of exercises that do not bend your spine forward.
- Incorporate squats and wall push-ups into your routine. These exercises target the wrists, hips and spine – three areas prone to fractures.
- Remember to take time to rest. Aim for one- to two-minute rests between circuits and two days between workouts.

## Resources

- American Council on Exercise: [www.acefitness.org](http://www.acefitness.org)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
- National Center for Biotechnology Information: [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
- American College of Sports Medicine: [www.acsm.org](http://www.acsm.org)

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