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Embracing lifestyle medicine

Exercise and aging: healthier living through lifestyle medicine

By Raj Kalra, MD

Exercise is a cornerstone of lifestyle medicine, and for seniors, it is one of the most powerful tools for improving overall health. Regular physical activity is essential for enhancing both physical and mental well-being, offering a wide range of benefits that significantly improve quality of life. By incorporating movement into their daily routines, older adults can experience substantial improvements in everything from maintaining mobility to boosting cognitive function.

Regular exercise is critical for maintaining mobility, enhancing quality of life, and promoting longevity. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that seniors engage in at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise each week, supplemented by strength training on two or more days. While this guideline may sound straightforward, its impact on health is profound.

Aerobic exercise — including activities like walking, swimming, cycling, and dancing — raises the heart rate, improves cardiovascular health, and increases endurance. Walking is an excellent choice for seniors due to its accessibility and low impact. Strength training, such as lifting light weights or using resistance bands, is crucial for preserving muscle mass and bone density. This becomes especially important as muscle loss can lead to increased risks of falls and injuries.

In addition to aerobic and strength exercises, balance and flexibility training can greatly reduce the risk of falls, improving coordination and overall stability. Activities like yoga, tai chi, and simple stretching not only enhance flexibility but also promote relaxation and mindfulness. Functional training, which focuses on everyday movements like standing up from a chair or climbing stairs, helps improve strength and coordination, making daily activities safer and easier.

The benefits of regular exercise extend far beyond physical fitness. Improved mobility and flexibility help maintain joint health and

increase range of motion, reducing stiffness. Exercise also has a powerful effect on mental health, alleviating symptoms of anxiety and depression by releasing endorphins, the body's natural mood lifters.

Research also shows that physical activity can lower the risk of cognitive decline and dementia, helping seniors preserve mental sharpness. Social engagement is another key benefit—group exercise classes or community sports offer opportunities for social interaction, combating loneliness and isolation. Additionally, regular exercise can improve sleep quality, making it easier for seniors to fall and stay asleep.

Creating a sustainable and enjoyable exercise routine is essential for maximizing these benefits. It's important for seniors to start at a comfortable pace and set realistic goals that build confidence. Incorporating a variety of exercises can help keep the routine engaging, while finding enjoyable activities—whether it's dancing, gardening, or playing a sport—will make it easier to stay active. Establishing a consistent schedule for exercise helps make it a habit. For those unsure where to start, consulting with a physical therapist or fitness trainer specializing in older adults can ensure exercises are safe and appropriate.

Exercise is a vital component of lifestyle medicine that can significantly enhance the health and well-being of seniors. By embracing regular physical activity, seniors can improve mobility, boost mental health, and foster meaningful social connections. As we continue to promote healthier aging in our community, let's encourage seniors to prioritize exercise for a fuller, more active life.

Dr. Rajesh Kalra is a board-certified physician in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, Pain Medicine, Lifestyle Medicine, and Obesity Medicine. He is dedicated to empowering seniors through lifestyle medicine and, as the founder of Aroha Memory Care, is committed to fostering a nurturing environment where seniors can thrive. For more information, please visit <http://www.arohamemorycare.com>.



Scott Finn serves to Ed Russell at Oakmont's famous pickleball courts.

Photo by Patti Buttitta