

EXERCISE AND BALANCE TRAINING FOR OLDER PEOPLE

Introduction (*M McMurdo, Professor Geriatric Medicine, University of Dundee*)

Regular physical activity is associated with a reduced risk of coronary heart disease, diabetes, cancer of the colon, and several other chronic diseases. Most of these health benefits can be gained by performing regular moderate intensity physical activities (eg brisk walking at three to four miles per hour, walking, dancing, bowling and gardening; formal exercise programmes are not essential.

Some bodily changes that were once thought to be due to ageing are now known to be the result of disuse and are therefore potentially reversible. An older person is often close to the point at which a small reduction in physical capability will make basic everyday activities, like rising from an armchair, impossible. For example a small additional reduction in fitness resulting from illness may cause a previously fit 80 year old to become immobile and dependent.

There is, however, substantial evidence that lost fitness can be regained with regular physical activity, even in extreme old age. The evidence is that

- Regular moderate intensity activity for 30 minutes on most days of the week benefits health.
- Activity need not be continuous and may be accumulated in short bouts.
- Older people who have long been sedentary should start slowly, beginning with a few minutes a day, and build up gradually.
- If an activity is not provoking symptoms it is very unlikely to be doing harm.
- For most older people the benefits of activity outweigh the risks.

The improvements in strength reported in studies of exercise training in older people may be equivalent to 10 to 20 years of “rejuvenation” and may prevent an individual from falling beneath functionally important thresholds.

Many other health benefits are associated with regular physical activity in old age. Weight bearing exercise may slow the rate of bone loss in older women; balance exercise training and Tai Chi may make falls less likely; and regular exercise may help in major depression. The social benefits of group exercise activities in later life should not be underestimated in a population where social isolation and loneliness may be common.

Recommendations

All Care Home residents should have the opportunity to participate in a daily programme of exercise and balance training, and should be encouraged to participate. Those residents who are unable to participate should be given exercises on a one to one basis by care assistants where necessary under the (occasional supervision) of a physiotherapist.