

## Strike a balance with exercise

**Pick up the pace and get moving. Physical activity can help prevent falls and ailments.**

By Fred W. Wright Jr., Special to the Times

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Couch potatoes take note:

Being sedentary - that means less than 20 minutes of exercise a week - is a health risk that ranks right up there with smoking, high blood pressure and high cholesterol.

"The other major factor," explains Dr. Marco Pahor, director of the University of Florida's Institute on Aging, "is the more people age, the higher the prevalence of being sedentary."

Even though Americans are living longer due to better health care, Pahor said recently, "the risk of obesity and sedentary (lifestyle) may reverse the positive trend in life expectancy."

And exercise needs to be exercise, he said. "Engaging in regular physical activity is different than strolling in the mall."

Moderate exercise means a brisk walk at 3 to 4 miles per hour; light exercise would be 1 to 2 miles per hour.

"For older people who have not been exercising, 2 miles per hour would be moderate exercise," Pahor said.

The ideal exercise pace, according to the U.S. Surgeon General, is at least 150 minutes of exercise a week, the professor said.

For an aging population, he said, the health benefits of regular exercise go beyond "lower blood pressure, lower blood sugar in diabetics, lower cholesterol, less depression. We have several studies showing . . . improved balance and less risk of falls."

Complications from falling, due to weak muscles and uncertain balance, kill thousands of older adults every year.

The issue of falls by older people is being studied by the World Health Organization, according to Colin Milner. He is CEO of the International Council on Active Aging, based in Vancouver, British Columbia.

"One out of every three people (older than) 75 falls" in any year, he said, "and 50 percent of those people will fall again."

Said Pahor: "Exercise is the only intervention that is statistically proven to reduce the risk of becoming disabled, primarily the risk of mobility disability - the incapacity to walk."

Having less mobility, he noted, happens "in all species, from worms to fruit flies to rats to monkeys and humans. Worms crawl more slowly as they age; fruit flies fly more slowly."

In a recently completed study conducted by the Institute on Aging of 400 sedentary people, ages 70 to 89, "Exercise seems to have reduced the risk of losing the capacity of walking" by about 26 percent, Pahor said.

Another recent study, conducted in Australia, showed a 40 percent reduction of the "potential of falling, with a very, very basic balance training program," said Milner of the Active Aging group.

What's at work, typically, is that inactive people lose 60 percent of their strength, and 75 percent of their power, between ages 35 and 75, Milner said. Here, power is defined as the ability to respond quickly, such as when feeling off balance.

"A lot of people, especially people 65 or older, didn't really grow up with the exercise movement," Milner said. "They think it's too late. It doesn't matter how old you are . . . you can regain much of your lost strength."

The answer is simple, Milner says. "You don't have to be excited about exercise . . . (Exercise) is putting one foot in front of the other. Just start moving. The benefits come with that."

For those who prefer direction and perhaps group support, commercial gyms and some nonprofit facilities such as the YMCA offer exercise programs for older adults or people who are less mobile.

One popular course is the Silver Sneakers program. It is offered at two dozen Lifestyle Family Fitness centers in the Tampa Bay area and also

at some YMCAs, according to Geoffrey Dyer, founder and CEO of the Lifestyle company.

The program includes exercises that can be done while sitting in a chair. Seniors who are Medicare-eligible and have signed with Humana can take part in Silver Sneakers free; memberships for others begin at \$42 a month.

Dyer said that more than 8,000 people participate in the classes through the Humana program.

Some participants, Dyer said, will arrive as much as "45 minutes before the class starts . . . because it's a social engagement as well as exercise."

A different, free program focusing on exercise and nutrition began in September. The 12-week program, Eat Better, Move More, is being coordinated by Community Aging Retirement Services, or CARES, which conducts health-oriented programs for the Agency on Aging for Pinellas and Pasco counties.

Participants in this program meet as a group but also have exercise guidelines to follow individually. The sessions are taking place in Gulfport, St. Petersburg and New Port Richey, according to Pat Sovonick, health and wellness coordinator for CARES.

Participants are given pedometers to monitor the number of steps they take toward weekly walking goals.

Group activities include stretching exercises, and there is instruction on what constitutes a proper diet. Sovonick added that the participants will be encouraged to "increase their eating of vegetables, fruits, fiber - the good stuff that nobody likes to eat."

*Fred W. Wright Jr. is a freelance writer in St. Petersburg.*

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#### **More information**

- The Silver Sneakers program is offered at numerous locations in the Tampa Bay area, including the St. Petersburg YMCA, 3200 First Ave. S, (727) 895-9622. It is open to YMCA members 65 and older. Membership is \$35 to join and \$42 a month.

Silver Sneakers: [www.silversneakers.com](http://www.silversneakers.com)

Lifestyle Family Fitness: [www.lff.com](http://www.lff.com)

- A seniors exercise program is offered by local Gold's Gyms. Members of WellCare and Universal Health Care programs can attend free. These classes meet five days a week, are geared toward low-intensity movements, and can be done while sitting in a chair.

For those 65 and older outside of these two health care programs, membership is \$29.99 a month and includes the senior classes.

Call (727) 541-7296, or go to [www.goldsgym.com](http://www.goldsgym.com).

- The Eat Better, Move More program will be offered again in January at the same three locations. For more information, call the Area Agency on Aging for Pasco/Pinellas County, (727) 863-9291 in New Port Richey, or one of the centers.

-University of Florida Institute on Aging: [www.aging.ufl.edu](http://www.aging.ufl.edu)

-International Council on Active Aging: toll-free 1-866-335-9777, [www.icaa.cc](http://www.icaa.cc)