

Fear Not Old Age and Frailty **by the American Institute for Cancer Research**

As we age, we tend to relax and avoid exertion. Sometimes it's because declining muscle strength makes physical activity more difficult. Many people even believe that nothing can be done to prevent muscle weakness and frailty.

Research, however, shows otherwise: Our muscles repair themselves and perform best with regular exercise and healthy eating – even among the frail elderly studied in nursing homes.

Why Muscles Matter

Muscle strength naturally declines by 15 percent every decade after 50. After age 70, the loss of strength is 30 percent per decade. If our strength declines, it becomes more difficult to lift objects. Even a bag of groceries may be too heavy.

Muscle mass serves health in other ways, too. Without adequate muscle mass, our sense of balance declines. It becomes difficult to walk, climb stairs or even stand up. Falling and broken and fractured bones become more of a hazard. That's when muscle strength can make the difference between living independently and ending up in a nursing home.

Good muscle tone can also improve our posture. Another important bonus is that even at rest, muscles burn calories – and the more muscle, the more calories burned.

If muscle mass decreases, our bodies use energy at a slower rate. With a slower metabolism, there's a tendency for body fat and weight to grow. Overweight increases the risk of diabetes and some cancers. The risk of osteoporosis also rises because losing muscle gives less structural support to your bones, which becomes thinner.

Resist Frailty with Strength Training

It's never too late to slow and possibly reverse muscle loss with strength training, also called "resistance" training. In one study of nursing home residents, 10 weeks of progressive strength training improved the strength of the thigh and lower leg muscles by an average of 113 percent.

Before you begin a resistance-training regimen, check with your doctor. Although it's important not to overdo it at first, challenge yourself after a week or so to make progress. Note that muscle gains show up on the weight side. A slight weight gain after you begin resistance training is natural.

The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) recommends buying "free" weights that you can grip or strap onto your ankles easily. Start at a few pounds for each arm or leg. As they grow easier to lift, add a pound or two every few weeks. When picking weights up from the floor or putting them down, bend your knees and use your legs to support your weight.

Last but not least, give your muscles a day of between weight-lifting sessions. Resistance training every other day lets muscles have important time to recover and build up for the next time you work out.

For more information of using free weights, visit the ACM web site (www.acsm.org). To record your progress, call the American Institute for Cancer Research to request your free activity journal, *Making Strides*. The number to call is (800) 843-8114, ext. 110.

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