

The Power of Strength Training for Older Adults

Over the years, adults lose muscle mass and therefore strength. Power – the ability to contract muscles quickly – also is reduced. These changes in the brain, nerves, and muscles can cause problems in living safely and independently. Older adults may become less able, or even unable, to take part in their favourite activities. They may also be at risk of falling. Some will simply be unable to get out of a chair.

But there is good news. No matter what your age or ability, you can get stronger and more powerful, by doing resistance or strength training.

Starting in the 1990s, researchers showed that strength training is helpful for older adults. You can do strength training if you are healthy, active and in your sixties. You can also do it if you are less active or frail and in your nineties. Physical activity guidelines for older adults recommend resistance training. Thanks to this information, resistance training programs for older adults are more popular and are now available in many communities.

Strength training guidelines

The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP) has published the *24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Adults (65+ years)*. The guidelines suggest that you do strength training at least two days a week, using the major muscle groups, such as those in your legs, trunk, and shoulders.

Whatever training you do, it must be challenging enough to improve your strength. You can do exercises at home, or at a gym or at your community centre. For equipment, you can use:

- weight training machines
- free weights
- tubing, or
- resistance bands



What are the benefits of strength training?

When you do strength training, you will regain some of the muscle mass you have lost due to aging. You will be able to go about your day with more ease, balance, and confidence. Research shows that with strength training, you can:

- Have healthier bones
- Have better posture
- Decrease your body fat
- Reduce your risk of falling
- Be able to walk faster
- React quicker
- Climb stairs more easily
- Rise out of a chair more easily

How do I train safely?

- Join a strength training program. Get help from a qualified personal trainer or fitness instructor to help you do your exercises properly.
- Breathe naturally. Do not hold your breath.
- Start slowly.
- Increase the number of times you do an exercise before you increase the weight.
- Always use the proper technique. Don't lift so much weight that you can't use the proper technique.

Tips for best results

- Train two to three times a week with one day of rest in between.
- Always exercise the main muscle groups: legs, arms, chest, back, and abdomen. This could involve 8 to 10 different exercises.
- Do at least one 'set' of each exercise. This means repeating the same exercise 8-15 times before resting.
- You can improve your strength more if you do two to three sets of each exercise.
- Rest for about two minutes between each set.
- If you are a beginner, choose a weight that you can move 10 to 15 times in one set.
- Once you are able to do an exercise more than 10-15 times in one set, it's time to increase the weight.

- You can then use a heavier weight that you can move 8 to 10 times in one set. This is called progression. It is necessary if you want to improve your strength.
- When you reach your strength goals, train once a week to maintain them.

Where can I find strength training programs?

Look for training programs at community health centres, community resource centres, YMCAs and YWCAs, recreation centres, fitness clubs, seniors' centres, universities or colleges. If the one near you does not have a strength training program for older adults, see if you can get them to start one! It simply makes good sense.

Many organizations associated with Active Aging Canada offer strength training programs. You may contact them for more information.

Alberta Fitness Leadership Certification Association (AFLCA) Provincial Fitness Unit

Toll free: 1-866-348-8648

Canadian Centre for Activity and Aging

Toll free: 1-866- 661-1603

Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP)

Toll-free: 1-877-651-3755

VON Canada SMART (Seniors Maintaining Active Roles Together)® Program

Toll free: 1-888-866-2273