

# Exercise can be life-saver for seniors too

## “Moving Grays Harbor”

By Maryann Welch

At any age, exercise helps promote health.

Today I want to focus on the health and welfare benefits of increased activity for older adults.

My own parents have been an inspiration to me by sustaining a high level of activity into their mid-80s. Personally, I think their continued walking and swimming as well as the incidental exercise they get by keeping up their three-story home, yard and garden, have in large part assured their good physical and mental health and independence.

Most senior citizens don't plan to become more inactive as they age. However, for so many seniors regular exercise slowly slips from their agenda and opportunities to be active may decrease. Before long, it's not just the exercise that's gone from their days, even the simple tasks and pleasures of life become only memories.

Some seniors, perhaps those who've never considered themselves athletic or those who know they're terribly out of shape, assume it's too late to get active again. It's never too late.

Regardless of where you or perhaps an older relative or friend fits in, today I want to agree with one cliché and contradict another.

First, it's true when it comes to your body and ability to move, you must “use it or lose it.” As you age, pay particular attention to how much physical activity you get in a day. In fact, it's more important than ever.

Second, if you've never been an exerciser, then I want to declare that you *can* teach an “old dog” new tricks. Simple activities and exercise can be learned and benefited from at any age.

## Great example of staying active

Helen Hegg, who's coming up to her 73 birthday soon, is a great example of how staying active can enhance one's life.

As the Grays Harbor Chamber of Commerce's development director, she stays busy encouraging businesses to join the chamber.

Helen volunteers for Habitat for Humanity and the Heritage Festival as well.

She also loves to garden, spend time with her seven children, 18 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren and to travel – having walked on the Great Wall of China a few years ago.

And she credits a lot of her energy, ability and zest for life to her commitment to stay active.

She regularly works out at Curves, where she was even employed part-time for a while. And, she takes yoga lessons twice a week.

Her inspiration: her own mother who walked 27 blocks a day until she was 87 and was able to control the ravages of diabetes for 35 years with diet, exercise and a little pill.

“My major interest is diabetes prevention. I'm really concerned about the current epidemic of diabetes. In 1900, diabetes was listed as the 100<sup>th</sup> common disease. Now it's the sixth most common,” she said.

The benefits of working out are numerous, she says, citing increased energy, decreased aches and pains, increased strength and flexibility along with weight control and even sharper mental acuity.

“As one matures, one needs all the help with one’s brain! That increased circulation makes a difference.”

And, just the sense of well being and vitality that come with exercise can be life-changing, she said.

Sometimes it’s the little things that you notice, Helen said. Just three weeks after she began taking yoga classes, she realized she could get dressed without holding onto anything.

“I don’t care about getting old, I only care about not being able to do the things, I like to or need to do,” she said.

### **More information next week**

In next week’s column I’ll talk to Jessie Stopsen, director of nurses for the Olympic Area Agency on Aging. She has lots to share about how seniors can start exercise and how critical exercise is to preventing falls.

### **This week’s challenge**

If you’re a senior, consider how you can get more activity into your day. If you have an older friend or relative, consider how you can encourage them to increase their activity.

### **Mark Your Calendar**

- **Any day** – Another picturesque walk is found as you head to Westport off the John’s River Road on Highway 105. Follow signs to the public fishing area and enjoy a scenic walk along the dike at John’s River Wildlife Area. There is about a half mile of paved, handicapped accessible walkway and another half mile of packed dirt/grass walkway. This walk is a special favorite of my parents. You will need a Dept. of Fish and Wildlife pass to park.

### **Bicyclists – We need you!**

I’m planning a future column on great places to safely bicycle in Grays Harbor. Bicyclists, please help us compile a comprehensive list! Do you know of

roads or trails that are particularly well suited for bikes? If so, e-mail us at [moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us](mailto:moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us) or call Wilma Weber at 532-8665, ext. 483.

*Maryann Welch is the director of Grays Harbor County’s Public Health and Social Services Department.*

*If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at [moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us](mailto:moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us) or visit our web site at [www.ghphss.org](http://www.ghphss.org).*