

Are you at risk for Sarcopenia?

Moving Grays Harbor
By Maryann Welch

I guess in order for you to know if you are at risk for Sarcopenia, you must first know what it is. Sarcopenia, simply put, is the age-related loss of muscle strength and mass. It is a common problem for older people and can have serious consequences - most notably an increased risk of falls and disability.

Now, for the good news: this is not a disease, so you don't have to worry about "catching it" from your friends or being vaccinated to help protect you. However, there is something you can do to lessen the impact of this condition....Exercise.

Yes, here I go again, touting the benefits of physical activity for every body, no matter what your age is.

As I was reading up on this condition, I learned that most people reach their peak muscle strength in their mid-twenties (ah, I remember it well) and maintain this strength relatively well until their sixth decade. At this point strength gradually declines across all muscle groups.

I know this information is not a surprise to any of you readers, however, the consequences of the decline in muscle strength may be. Along with muscle strength come endurance and balance. The number one reason for hospitalization of the elderly is as a

result of falls. Some of these falls can be prevented by maintaining muscle strength (and balance) as we age. And this is where exercise comes in.

Regular physical activity is necessary to maintain the mass and strength of the muscles. You don't get credit for all the miles you walked in your 40's or how active you were in high school! No, exercise results are transient – the tried and true "use it or lose it" philosophy definitely applies here.

If you are in your 60's (or more) and don't make it a point to get routine physical activity, don't get discouraged. Studies show that no matter what age you start a routine exercise program, you will realize an increase in strength in just a few weeks. However, these benefits will be lost if you do not maintain the program. Yes, there is always a catch!

Fortunately, an "exercise program" has many different characteristics based on your specific goals and preferences. Training for a triathlon is going to require a much different level of commitment and intensity than training for the goal of living a functional and independent life in retirement.

As far as the preferences, many older adults like to exercise in a group environment as it not only provides the benefit of physical activity, it also serves as a social outlet and when you are part of a group you are more accountable when you miss a session. While a group activity is one option, some people like the independence of exercising in their home. What ever

your exercise preference is, make sure you enjoy it as this is what will help you stay motivated to make exercise a routine part of your life.

Now, what exercise is best? Well that is a different story with no easy answer.. One person may benefit from incorporating some strengthening exercises while someone else may need to add some stretching or aerobic endurance activity to their day. The bottom line is that every little bit helps.

If you are looking for somewhere to start, these local clubs have classes specifically for older active adults: Monte Fitness; Get Fit Health Club (in Elma); and the YMCA of Grays Harbor. In addition to these clubs, Coastal Fitness (Aberdeen), Timber Gym (Aberdeen), Curves (Westport, Aberdeen, Hoquiam, Ocean Shores and Elma), and Ocean Crest (Moclips) all have strength and aerobic equipment available in their memberships.

Most clubs also have personal trainers to get you started in the right direction if you have questions. Seniors always get the benefit of reduced rates and if you have Healthways Insurance, you can get free gym memberships at both Monte Fitness and Coastal Fitness. It doesn't get better than free!

Of course, other things that can influence balance and muscle strength as we age include: diet, medication and injuries – or the combination of all of the above.

Now that I planted the seed, won't you make it a priority to find out what will help keep you independent? The Olympic Area

Agency on Aging is once again hosting a Senior Information and Fall Prevention Workshop for Grays Harbor. This will take place on Thursday, September 20th from 9:30-3:30 at the River of Life Ministries at 308 West King Street in Aberdeen. Everyone is welcome and this is a very informative day. There are speakers and professionals from all over the county available to answer your questions and help you stay independent and active. Our Department will also have a table there – so stop by and say “hi”.

In the meantime, get out there and delay Sarcopenia!

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 public health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.ghphss.org.