

Message to the elderly: It's never too late to prevent illness

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A new study by a NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center physician-scientist has an important message for the elderly: It's not too late to improve your health through diet and exercise, even if you've had an unhealthy lifestyle in the past!

Published in the November issue of the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, the report surveyed scientific literature and found that adults, 65 and older, can have significant health improvements with simple and realistic lifestyle changes. It found that risk can be reduced for many diseases -- including obesity, cancer, cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis.

"I think this is an extremely important and positive message," says the paper's lead symposium editor, Dr. Richard S. Rivlin, professor of medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College and attending physician at NewYork-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell. "Many elderly people feel that it is too late for them to improve their health, but that is simply not true."

Dr. Rivlin analyzed how the elderly can ward off risks to their health late in life by improving body composition -- lowering fat and boosting muscle mass. Adhering to a low-calorie and low-fat diet -- high in vegetables and fruits -- with a regular exercise plan, can help the elderly stave off the diseases of aging.

"When measures to combat chronic disease are started in one's 60s and 70s, there are still definite benefits," says Dr. Rivlin. "But older adults

must realize that there is no quick fix. They must change their lifestyles."

Specific findings:

-- Lowering high blood pressure or hypertension -- a major risk for cardiovascular disease -- through improved diet and exercise had more dramatic health benefits for the elderly than for any other age group. Control of hypertension could potentially prevent one-fifth of coronary heart disease cases in men, and 30 percent in women.

-- Older adults who adhered to a low-calorie diet with regular exercise had lower rates of cancer. In one study, risk was reduced by nearly 50 percent.

-- Benefits of weight training include increased ability to burn calories and prevention of osteoporosis.

-- Calcium and vitamin D supplements for seniors helped slow rates of bone loss and reduce the number of bone fractures.

"Our study reviews and presents the most up-to-date information showing the influence a healthy lifestyle may have on cardiovascular disease, cancer and osteoporosis," says Dr. Rivlin. "I also believe that the risk for other diseases, like diabetes and pulmonary disease, can also be avoided through later intervention. But, the earlier, the better."

Source: New York- Presbyterian Hospital

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