

Exercise Key to Older Adult Fall Prevention

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Being able to stay in their homes and remain independent is a daily struggle for many older adults. As we age we tend to lose our flexibility, our connective tissue tightens and we have prolonged reaction times. Problems with vision, including depth perception, all increase the likelihood of falling. When a child falls it may result in a few bumps and bruises. However, the older we get, the more the ramifications of a fall escalate including being the leading cause of injury deaths in older adults and the most common cause of non-fatal injuries and hospital admissions. According to Val Walkowiak, medical integration coordinator for Loyola Center for Fitness, exercise plays a major role in preventing falls.

“Improving posture and balance helps strengthen weak muscle groups in the back, core, hips and legs. This improves mobility, which limits the fall risks,” said Walkowiak. “Maintaining upright posture is vital for daily living and function.”

For instance, it can seem that [older adults](#) are shuffling instead of walking. This is actually a way to compensation for lack of balance and poor posture. They take shorter strides, have a wider gait and tend to look at the floor to try to avoid tripping.

Working on [posture](#), such as sitting up straight in a chair and holding abs in can strengthen key muscles groups helping to create a more normal walking gait.

Improving static balance, which is the ability to control postural sway

while standing, is key to preventing falls.

“We naturally move a lot. When you stand still you actually aren’t still. Your head moves and your body moves with it to keep inline with the head,” said Walkowiak. “As we age it is important to train our brains to quickly activate the right muscles to anticipate and respond to changes in our environment such as stepping up on a curb or into a bath tub.”

Some of the exercises Walkowiak uses to stimulate brain and muscle control are marching in place, heel walks, working on ankle flexibility and quick steps with sudden stops to help increase reaction times.

“So many of the everyday things we take for granted can be more difficult as we age. Cardiovascular endurance, strength, balance and flexibility training are all needed to help a person stay independent. But balance, staying away from falls, seems to be what matters most to seniors,” said Walkowiak.

Walkowiak leads a class specifically aimed at meeting the exercising needs of older adults in a land-based setting. The class doesn’t require getting up and down off the floor. Strength training is done with wrist and ankle weights so people with arthritis don’t have to use handheld weights. Most exercises are done in a chair or standing up. Many seniors are drawn to aquatic classes because of arthritis or lack of flexibility, which Walkowiak thinks is great. Still, she encourages seniors to get out of the water.

“We don’t live in water. It is important for seniors to perform exercises on land to increase bone density, help improve balance and simulate the functional movements we perform each day during our daily tasks,” said Walkowiak.

After taking the class seniors have found that they don’t rely on others as

much. Seemingly simple tasks, such as lifting a grocery bag, that once caused difficulty now come with ease. One woman said she was able shovel her whole driveway and not feel muscle pain the following day.

Exercising is not only good for the body it stimulates the mind, improves hand and eye coordination and is an excellent social outlet.

“We have a great time together. Strong friendships have formed and it’s hard for me to get the class started because everyone just wants to talk about what’s happening in their lives. It’s so great to see these people bonding, helping each other and staying healthy,” said Walkowiak.

Provided by Loyola University

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