

The magic pill is exercise

September 11 2017, by Lisa Lapoint



"Regular physical exercise can bring a host of health benefits to older adults," said Roger Fielding. "If we want to reduce muscle loss, functional decline, and loss of independence as we age, we need to keep people moving." Credit: Ingimage

As people age, walking and balance become more of a challenge, but also more of a necessity. Older adults who aren't physically active

increase their risk of illness, hospitalization and disability. Just how much exercise could make a difference?

In new research from the Lifestyle Interventions and Independence for Elders (LIFE) study, Roger Fielding and colleagues from eight field sites across the United States found that people who are sedentary who added at least 48 minutes of [physical activity](#) to their weekly routines saw the greatest benefit to their physical function and biggest reduction in their disability risk.

The results were published in the journal *PLOS ONE* in August.

"These are people who want to live healthy, independent lives and are at risk for losing that," said Fielding, senior scientist and director of the Nutrition, Exercise Physiology, and Sarcopenia Laboratory at the Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition and Research Center on Aging at Tufts. "In our first study, we confirmed that physical activity can help prevent mobility loss. Now we see that small increases can have big impacts."

The LIFE study analyzed 1,635 men and women age 70-89 for an average of 2.6 years. Half were randomly assigned to a program of walking and walking-based strength, flexibility and balance training; half participated in health education workshops. All had low levels of [physical functioning](#) at the start and reported fewer than 20 minutes per week of [regular physical activity](#) in the month prior to starting the study.

The more exercise the people did, the better their physical function, with the greatest prevention of major mobility loss in the group that participated in at least 48 minutes of physical activity per week.

"Regular physical exercise can bring a host of health benefits to [older adults](#) and the benefits often outnumber the risks," Fielding said. "If we want to reduce muscle loss, functional decline, and loss of independence

as we age, we need to keep people moving."

More information: Roger A. Fielding et al. Dose of physical activity, physical functioning and disability risk in mobility-limited older adults: Results from the LIFE study randomized trial, *PLOS ONE* (2017). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0182155 , doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0182155

Provided by Tufts University

Citation: The magic pill is exercise (2017, September 11) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-09-magic-pill.html>

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