

You can reverse major risk factors for falls!



Learn how you can address Sarcopenia and poor balance in older age.



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ABOUT one-third of older people fall each year. Falls may be a precipitating factor for fractures, hospitalisation, loss of independence and even residential aged care placement.

There are a number of risk factors for falling. Two of the major risk factors for falling that increase with age are sarcopenia and declining balance, and they can be reversed with exercise. Programs like ActiveStrongerBetter focus on strengthening and balance exercises, aerobic exercises and activities that build co-ordination and reaction time which are central to slowing sarcopenia and improving balance.

SARCOPENIA

Sarcopenia is the loss of muscle strength and mass that accompanies older age. You will probably notice that you do not feel as strong and muscular as you were as a younger person. Sarcopenia is made worse by chronic disease and obesity.

Chronic disease has an inflammatory component which exacerbates muscle loss. This is why it is critical to do resistance exercise with conditions such as Diabetes, Heart or Lung Disease, Kidney Failure, Cancer and Cancer treatment, Arthritis, Parkinsons Disease and even Depression and Dementia.

Muscle loss starts in the late twenties in sedentary people and late forties in people who maintain a high level of physical activity. The rate of loss increases with age.

So, as we get older, we should be doing a bit more resistance training to help maintain muscle capacity. There are many ways to build up strength.

People with obesity have large, but poor quality, muscles. Fat tissue is an active endocrine organ releasing many chemicals that increase the rate of muscle loss.

The good news is that the muscle loss related to age, chronic disease or obesity, can easily be reversed with resistance exercise. After eight weeks of weight-bearing exercise, muscle strength can increase by 6-10%. This improvement can be doubled if there is a resistance component (weight-loaded exercise or lifting weights).

Given that the rate of muscle loss in your eighties is about 2% per year, the exercise programs described above can easily give a person an extra 10 years of independent life.

BALANCE

One of the first changes that people notice with age is a decline in balance. We are so accustomed as young people to climb on rocks and ladders, reach beyond our centre of gravity, lean onto one leg more than the other. We take balance for granted so much that we are surprised when this skill starts to decline.

There are three physiological systems that control balance: vision; vestibular system (middle ear) and proprioception which is the information fed back from the body to the brain about position and stability.

Proprioception depends on the long nerves to the legs which deteriorate with age as does hearing and vestibular function. As we age, we depend more on vision which explains why balance deteriorates in poor light and why we should wear a hat when we go outside.

Damage to the long nerves can be minimised by abstaining from smoking and controlling vascular risk factors such as high blood pressure, cholesterol and obesity. Damage to vestibular function can be minimised by avoiding loud noise.

The good news is that despite age and inevitable organ function decline, balance can be improved by exercises that are specific for this purpose and are part of the ActiveStrongerBetter program.

The moral of this story is that falls can be reduced by regular exercise that includes




aerobic, resistance and balance components. Another benefit from exercise is that if you do fall, often the recovery process is quicker and the injuries may not be as severe.

These combinations of helpful exercises can be found in ActiveStrongerBetter sessions across the region. If you do not find one close to you, you can contact our team, or visit your local Fitness or Exercise Professional for guidance.

Otherwise, wear a hat outside, avoid unnecessary risks such as climbing ladders and have safety rails installed on stairs. If you need glasses for reading and out-of-doors, do not use bifocals but get two pairs,

one for each environment. Other quick tips to support your balance: check with your doctor if you have concerns about your medications and balance; ask your doctor to check your ears regularly for excess wax; keep well and understand that simple colds/sinus conditions can affect your balance. More information about falls and falls prevention can be found at fallsnetwork.neura.edu.au/aprilfalls/. APRIL every year is the month where the health focus is falls, and strategies to prevent falls especially in older people are highlighted.

To learn more about being active, stronger and better, visit activestrongerbetter.net or email asb@novacare.org.au 



 Active Stronger Better