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Why is it some 65-year-olds compete in marathons while others can't lift a 5-pound bag of groceries? Aging experts Terrie Heinrich Rizzo, MAS, and Karl Knopf, EdD, say people grow older in dramatically different ways for numerous reasons, including genetics, gender, injuries, lifestyle and chronic diseases. Lifestyle choices contribute greatly to how we age—and strength training is one of the most promising strategies on the antiaging front.

Gerontologists often use a measurement called “functional age” to describe our physical abilities as we grow older. On average, regular exercisers have a lower functional age than nonexercisers of the same chronological age. Strength training plays a key role in keeping functional age low. Why? Because it slows age-related sarcopenia (loss of muscle mass, which also results in loss of strength and increased body fat); improves insulin sensitivity and blood glucose regulation; reduces osteoporosis and arthritis pain; improves stability, thereby reducing the risk of falling; preserves cognitive functioning; and alleviates depression.

What About Health Conditions?

Most people over age 50 can participate safely in some kind of strength training. In fact, with a physician's approval and the guidance of a qualified fitness professional you may be able to proceed even if you have a serious health condition, such as heart disease, hypertension, diabetes or arthritis. For people with such conditions, strength training can sometimes offer benefits beyond those provided by medication alone.

That said, be sure to put your training on hold if you experience rapid onset illness (particularly if it involves fever), unstable chest pain, uncontrolled diabetes, uncontrolled hypertension, asthma, congestive heart failure, musculoskeletal pain or falling episodes; or if you are being treated for hernia, cataracts, retinal bleeding or joint injuries.

Training Guidelines

If you are over 50, your basic strength training program should include eight to 10 exercises involving all the major muscle groups (arms, shoulders, chest, abdomen, back, hips and legs). Do one set (10 to 15 repetitions) of each exercise two to three days per week. Perform the exercises slowly, taking six to nine seconds for each repetition and moving through the complete range of motion (according to your individual tolerance). A slow exercise speed relies more on muscle tension and less on momentum, thereby increasing the training result and decreasing injury risk. Taking two to three

seconds for the harder, lifting phase and four to six seconds for the lowering phase has proved an effective training protocol. However, these guidelines should be adjusted according to your individual abilities.

For Safety's Sake

For optimum health as you age, make regular strength training part of your wellness program, being sure to follow these safety guidelines from Rizzo and Knopf:

- Obtain medical clearance from your doctor before beginning a strength training regimen.
- Always work with a qualified fitness professional who knows your medical history and consults your doctor regarding any medications you take or chronic conditions you have.
 - Before training, always warm up for 10 to 15 minutes with low-exertion rhythmic movement and stretching; afterward, cool down for at least five to 10 minutes with gently active movement, stretching and relaxation.
 - Never hold your breath. Exhale on exertion and inhale during recovery.
 - Progress slowly and gradually to higher resistance.
 - Perform all movements with control; do not jerk the weights.
- Perform all movements with your spine in a neutral position. (Obtain professional guidance if necessary.)
- Avoid high-risk moves, such as straight-legged sit-ups or deep squats. Do not hyperflex or hyperextend joints. Check with a fitness professional to ensure that all the exercises you do are appropriate for your age and abilities.
- Pay careful attention to proper technique, which is critical to preventing injury, especially when you are in a learning phase of training (for example, when you are practicing a new exercise or progressing to a heavier weight).
- Be aware that feelings of exertion or fatigue are normal, but a sharp, shooting pain or dull, grinding pain, especially in a joint, is a warning signal. Use the Two-Hour Rule: If, two hours after a training session, you feel worse joint or muscle pain than before the session started, you need to cut back on the training intensity or duration.

Strength Training When You're 50+

