

Physical Activity Adds to Independence and Longevity

Older adults who are physically active are apt to be healthier, maintain their independence and live longer than their couch-potato peers, new research shows. And people who had been sedentary but became active - even those who started when they were well into their 80s - cut their risk of dying and lengthened the amount of time they were able to live on their own, according to Dr. Jeremy M. Jacobs and his colleagues from the Hebrew University Medical School. "The take home message is that no matter your age, it never is too late to start exercising," Jacobs noted.

While the benefits of exercise are clear, there has been little research on physical activity in for those over seventy. To investigate, Dr. Jacobs and his team followed 1,861 people 70 to 88 years old for up to 18 years. Those who participate in at least 4 hours of physical activity each week were classified as physically active, while those who got less were considered sedentary. Jacobs and his colleagues found being active not only increased life span but also increased the likelihood that a person would be able to continue to perform activities like bathing, dressing and eating by themselves. Those who were active also when they were 78 were nearly twice as likely to maintain independence in their activities of daily living when they reached 85.

The message of his findings for older adults, Jacobs said, is to start being active today if you aren't already. "The beauty of our finding is that the benefits of activity were seen with as little as 4 hours a week of gentle activity. That's just over 30 minutes a day." To stay safe people should start slowly and rest as needed, he added, and anyone with a history of falls or who is concerned that they are unsteady on their feet should seek medical advice before starting to exercise. "Walking is my first choice," Jacobs said. "In addition to the physical benefits, the act of meeting people, interacting with others and enjoying nature are all ingredients of successful aging."