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FITNESS AS WE AGE: FORM AND FUNCTION

By Franci Cohen

Maintaining a healthy weight and physical strength is important throughout life, as overweight and obesity are linked to a variety of chronic health conditions as well as to cancer and other diseases. As we age, physical fitness continues to play a significant role in our overall health. At midlife, hormonal shifts cause our bodies to change, often in ways that force us to reshape our eating and exercise habits; and in the years that follow, questions about bone health and muscle mass arise for many women.

The good news: taking care of our bodies by maintaining a consistent exercise routine is a proactive step we can take to improve our health and well-being as we age. Here is the 411 to help you keep fit as a fiddle at midlife and beyond.

STRENGTH TRAINING TO WARD OFF OSTEOPOROSIS

Weight bearing exercise plays a key role in maintaining and strengthening bone density with age. Our bones are highly porous and soft. As we age, our bones lose density and the bone matrix becomes more brittle and vulnerable to breaks (especially if you are inactive). Resistance training and lifting weights can prevent this bone degeneration; as more tension is placed on the muscles, more pressure is placed on the underlying bones, and those bones respond by creating new tissue. Remember: "weight-bearing" exercise can be as simple as lifting light weights and even standing up to get out of a chair; when done repeatedly, and within the context of a proper workout, both can provide valuable benefit.

MIXING IT UP AND HITTING IT ALL

As a young athlete, you may have been focused on speed and agility, while someone else spent the better part of her youth as an avid runner focused solely on endurance. As we age we need to remind ourselves to cover all the bases with regard to our health. We need weight-bearing exercise to strengthen bones that will otherwise become frail with age. We need to perform exercises that increase balance, which also declines with age. We also must continuously challenge our heart and lungs to maintain proper cardiorespiratory health and vital capacity.

The most important and all-encompassing factor that we must remember is that if we become sedentary, aging can easily lead to an overall decline in body function. Un-

like in youth, long periods of muscle atrophy are more challenging to overcome, and older muscles do not respond well to sudden bouts of exercise. Additionally, younger muscle tissue has more than four times more regenerative stem cells than old muscle tissue. The bottom line: we must work out thoroughly and comprehensively on a regular basis throughout our lives to keep our muscles strong.

DAILY STRETCHING

While it is always important to stretch before and after a workout, older muscle tissue tends to frequently tense up and freeze. As such it is best to make stretching a part of your daily routine beginning at age 45, if not before. Stretch when you wake up and your body has been lying still for a while, stretch before and after your workouts, and give yourself a light relaxing stretch to calm the body down before bedtime. Stretching will not only help maintain the integrity and elasticity of your muscles but also increase blood flow and circulation and many other benefits, too!

NOT RELYING ON SUPPLEMENTS TO DO THE WORK

Taking calcium supplements to increase bone density or magnesium to help aid muscle function is no replacement for physical fitness. Do not rely on supplements; get up and get moving! With attention to your nutritional needs and a consistent exercise regime, you can go a long way toward keeping your body youthful, healthy, and strong.



Franci Cohen is a personal trainer and a certified nutritionist with masters degrees in nutrition and exercise physiology. She is also the creator of SPIDERBANDS®, a total-body cardio resistance workout. With over 18 years of experience, Franci has been a mainstay in the fitness and nutrition industries. She devotes much of her time to her specialty fitness center, Fuel Fitness, in Brooklyn, New York, and continues to teach group fitness classes, train clients, and broaden her perspective in all areas of fitness, nutrition, and wellness. Learn more at francicohen.com.