

## Aging and Exercise

Aging is something that happens to everyone. It is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by genetic, environmental, and lifestyle factors. As a person ages, several changes happen within their body:

- Gradual loss of taste and smell
- Tooth and oral bone loss
- Gastrointestinal function decreases
- Vision and hearing decreases
- Body fat percentage increases
- Loss of bone mass and its associated minerals
- Reduced mental capacity
- Increased predominance of chronic diseases
- Loss of muscle control, strength, and endurance
- Decrease in liver and kidney functions
- Decrease in heart and lung fitness

One theory as to why this occurs is that as we become older we lose the ability to repair ourselves when internal disorders or external injuries occur. With age, our immune systems become less and less effective and lose their ability to fight infection and abnormal cells. The second theory is that our cells can only divide to make new cells a set number of times, which eventually leads to death.

One way to slow these processes is participating in regular physical activity. It has been shown that regular physical activity helps reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, certain cancers, high blood pressure, depression, osteoporosis, and type II diabetes. Regular activity also improves body composition, fitness, longevity, the ability to perform normal daily activities, and the management of arthritis. You hold the key to improving the length and quality of your life.

How should you begin? If you are over forty years old, you should be seeing your physician annually for a physical. Before you begin a new exercise program we highly recommend talking to your physician. **Ask your physician: Is it safe for me to exercise? What forms of exercise should I avoid? At what intensity should I exercise? Will any of my medications make it dangerous for me to elevate my heart rate? What exercises will be most beneficial to me, without putting me at risk?** Your physician knows what your specific needs are and will make the recommendations that are best for you.

If after the doctor has made his recommendations you still feel uneasy about getting started, please contact the Lifequest staff. We are here to help you.

- **Start off slow.** Don't overdo it. Start slowly and work your way to higher levels providing plenty of recovery time.
- **Make sure your exercise routine includes aerobic, strength, and flexibility exercises.** If your doctor has not limited your activity, your routine should include these three areas. Aerobic exercise is great for strengthening the heart, lungs, and peripheral vasculature. Strength training is great for maintaining both muscle strength and bone density. Flexibility exercises are excellent for preventing stiff and immobile joints. As we get older our joints tend to stiffen due to a reduction in activity and various physiological effects of aging. Regular activity and flexibility exercises have been shown to prevent the drying of synovial (joint) fluid. So in order to keep those joints from aching every time you move, get yourself involved in a flexibility program and make all the creaks, snaps, crackles, and pops go away.
- **Maintain.** Don't just exercise for a few weeks and think that you've done enough. Regular physical activity needs to be a part of your every day life. It is recommended that individuals exercise 3 to 4 times per week, in order to reap the benefits from exercise.
- **Find something that you enjoy.** I can't stress enough how important it is to find a type of exercise that you enjoy. There are many types of aerobic exercise such as jogging, walking, biking, stepping, rowing, cross-country skiing, tennis, speed walking, racquetball, and swimming. Make it fun. Get your friends involved.

**Know the warning signs of a stroke and a heart attack.** The warning signs of a heart attack are an uncomfortable pressure, fullness, squeezing, or pain in the center of the chest that lasts for more than a few minutes, or goes away and then returns, pain that spreads to the shoulders, neck, or arms, and chest discomfort with lightheadedness, fainting, sweating, nausea, or shortness of breath. Some warning signs of stroke are: unexplained dizziness, sudden temporary weakness or numbness on one side of the face, arm, leg, or body, temporary loss of speech, temporary dimness or loss of vision in one eye, and/or sudden severe, unexplained headaches. If at any point during exercise or in your everyday life you should experience these symptoms seek help immediately, and don't push yourself on thinking it will go away. Don't hesitate to call 911.