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UNH Expert Stresses Importance of Exercise For Seniors During Pandemic

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DURHAM, N.H.—During the pandemic, many people have been getting less physical activity and becoming more sedentary, especially seniors who are homebound for safety reasons. Experts at the University of New Hampshire say it is more important than ever for older adults to find safe and accessible ways to remain physically active to help strengthen muscles, improve balance, enhance their immune system and reduce stress while being safe at home.

“People in their 20s and 30s often set health goals like running marathons or losing weight but as people age there is a point where they shift their priorities to maintaining health, not necessarily for athletics or looks but for improving the ability to do their daily activities,” said Summer Cook, associate professor of kinesiology and an expert on senior fitness.

Cook points out that being sedentary can accelerate health issues, so it is important for seniors to look for ways to add extra physical activity into their days that is above and beyond the typical daily activities they engage in around the house. Along with muscle strength, exercise can increase blood flow to the heart, improve both balance and posture, strengthen bones and joints and enhance cognitive function. “My goal is to keep older adults as independent as possible as they age,” said Cook. “And while most seniors find themselves not getting out of the house as much these days, it’s important for them to know that there are still plenty of ways to work on their health at home.”

Cook says seniors don’t necessarily need a gym or expensive equipment to get moving and offers these tips to get started:

- First, discuss any exercise plan with your doctor to make sure it is safe and focuses on your physical needs
- Look for a Zoom or online exercise class specifically designed for seniors
- Focus on low-impact exercises that help with balance, flexibility and strength
- Take walks with friends following CDC COVID-19 guidelines (face coverings and physically distanced)
- Do not over exercise; start slow and build slowly to avoid injury and boredom

In general, physical activity can be safe and healthy for seniors and in most cases can help with conditions like heart disease, diabetes and arthritis. In fact, many individuals with these health conditions can benefit from mild to moderate activity. Cook adds that exercising with others, like walks and online classes, can also be important to help with any social isolation seniors may be experiencing.



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Media Contact

Robbin Ray '82 (</unhtoday/contributor/robbin-ray-82>) | Communications and Public Affairs | robbin.ray@unh.edu (<mailto:robbin.ray@unh.edu>) | 603-862-4864

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