

# Considerations in Treating Physically Active Older Adults and Aging Athletes



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## KEYWORDS

• Aging • Exercise • Physical activity • Injuries • Successful aging

## KEY POINTS

- There are significant physiologic and physical changes that occur with age. Appreciating these changes is important when treating older patients.
- Physical activity and exercise have many benefits in the older population. Improved cognitive function, physical well-being, and management of common chronic conditions are but some of the benefits that combine to significantly impact quality of life and offset natural declines associated with aging.
- Podiatrists can and should promote the benefits of exercise to their patients.

Medical practitioners learn in school not to treat children as “little adults” because there are so many physical and physiologic differences between an adult and a child but they also need to bear in mind that treating older adults is not the same as treating younger adults for precisely the same reasons. Understanding the physical and physiologic changes of aging is important so sports medicine practitioners can tailor treatment plans and patient education so as to best treat musculoskeletal injuries and to help minimize the risk of reinjury.

The US Public Health Service declared that exercise is 1 of the 5 priority areas to prevent premature morbidity and mortality. The National Council on Aging recommends that older adults “engage in moderate physical activity for at least 30 minutes 5 days a week and muscle-strengthening activities on 2 or more days a week that work all major muscle groups.” However, statistics show that fewer than one-third of Americans aged 65 and older meet this level.<sup>1</sup> Medical professionals owe it to their patients to not only treat their current conditions but also to educate them on the benefits of maintaining or starting a fitness program so that they may enjoy a better quality of life as they age.

Although age-related changes are unavoidable, research is suggesting that many of the declines previously associated with aging may be actually more due to the

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sedentary lifestyle that many older individuals adopt.<sup>2,3</sup> Some researchers estimate that exercise can offset the aging decline by up to 50%.<sup>4-7</sup> In addition to the natural aging process, many older individuals also have chronic diseases, such as hypertension, osteoarthritis, diabetes, or cardiac disease. Regular exercise has long been a recommended part of management for these conditions. Hessert and colleagues<sup>8</sup> published a study that showed that elders who participated in a functional fitness program made significant improvements in the fitness parameters studied. They combined exercises that addressed mobility, strength, balance, dexterity, and flexibility. They concluded that exercise was a good complement to older adults' other medical management strategies, such as pharmaceuticals, surgery, and nutrition.

Exercise is much more important than just a weight management tool. Its benefits go well beyond burning calories. This bodes well for older adults and provides an opportunity for medical practitioners to speak to their patients about the importance of remaining active or increasing physical activity as they age to maximize their health and quality of life.

Weight gain with aging is unfortunately common and of course exercise is important in managing weight. In fact, Montoye and colleagues<sup>9</sup> found that previously athletic individuals who stop participating in sport have a rapid weight gain beginning at age 45. Other studies show that even individuals who have previously been sedentary can significantly decrease their risk of serious illness and risk of disability by starting a fitness program later in life. The National Institute on Aging at the National Institutes of Health has a Web site and exercise program specifically for older individuals called go4life, which describes very well the benefits of exercise and provides detailed information on exercise programs.<sup>10</sup>

The volume of research on aging is increasingly showing that there are physical, cognitive, and psychosocial benefits to remaining physically active.<sup>7,8,11-13</sup> Older individuals are more prone to overuse injuries and are slower to heal than younger individuals for reasons that will be discussed later in this article. Despite the increased risk of injury, however, researchers and clinicians agree that the benefits of exercise far outweigh the risks.

The cognitive and neurologic benefits of physical activity are broad and just as important as the physical benefits. In older individuals, exercise improves learning and memory, and has both therapeutic and preventive effects on depression.<sup>11</sup> Research also has shown delayed onset and reduced risk of Alzheimer, Parkinson, and Huntington diseases in physically active individuals.<sup>14-16</sup>

Some research shows that the benefits of an active lifestyle may have payoffs later in life. Rovio and colleagues<sup>17</sup> found that leisure time physical activity at mid-life at least twice a week was associated with a reduced risk of dementia in individuals between the ages of 65 and 79.

There are a number of fitness activities that provide different health benefits and a well-rounded fitness routine should include different activities to maximize those benefits. One year of endurance training improved maximum oxygen uptake to the level of a sedentary person 10 to 20 years younger and also improved muscle function and decreased body fat.<sup>18</sup> A literature review on physical activity and aging suggests that it is important to combine endurance training with resistance training to reap the maximum benefit of exercise.<sup>19</sup>

## **AGE-RELATED PHYSICAL AND PHYSIOLOGIC CHANGES**

The aging process starts earlier than many people suspect. Studies show that some physiologic and physical changes begin as early the third decade of life. This decline

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