

Exercise for Health, Strength & Self Esteem

By age 75, more than a quarter of American men and two-thirds of women cannot lift more than ten pounds. If you want to stay strong and pain-free throughout your golden years, the recommendation from health experts is simple: strength train.

Strength training maintains muscle mass, preserves bone density, lifts the ratio of "good" to "bad" cholesterol, relieves arthritis pain, and triggers the brain's production of mood-lifting electrochemicals. Now the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign reports another benefit of a different kind of exercise: stretching boosts seniors' self-esteem.

Funded by the National Institutes of Health's Institute of Aging, the researchers selected 174 previously sedentary people aged 60 to 75. Pre-study measurements included self-assessment of body image, personal competency, and self-esteem. Thrice weekly for six months, half the subjects walked at an indoor shopping mall while half did stretching and toning exercises at a gym.

Both groups showed improvements. However, as OnHealth reporter Katrina Woznicki summarizes, "the stretching and toning group showed larger gains." And longer lasting ones: after the study was over "75 percent of them continued with their exercises compared to only 51 percent of the walking group."

The self-esteem study was published in the *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* (August 2000), whose material must pass the stringent protocol of peer review before it is accepted for publication. Nevertheless, here's our take:

First, the researchers studied mostly white, well-educated and overweight females, according to Woznicki. Second, after six months of stepped-up activity, just about anyone should lose weight; and most people who lower their weight raise their self-esteem. Finally, all those who stretched and toned did so at a gym; all the walkers walked at a mall. Perhaps it isn't the exercise but the setting. An equally valid inquiry might be whether results are attributable to the gym itself - its camaraderie, the residency of an attention-giving, certified trainer, and the equipment. Prior studies indicate that better results, more positive attitudes toward exercising, and longer-lasting new behaviors, happen when equipment is available than when not.