

Physical activity the key to healthy living for seniors

National Senior Safety Week will run from Nov. 6 to 12, and thoughts of reduced stress and activity levels go hand in hand with the idea of retirement, whether the job one is leaving has been interesting, motivating, dull or mind numbing.

A lifetime of hard work and perseverance has finally paid off, allowing for a suitable lifestyle, freedom from the grind of daily life and to live as one chooses.

The Canada Safety Council reminds seniors of the importance of staying active. Too often, retirement leads to a sedentary lifestyle spurred by a lack of the necessity to stay active.

According to Statistics Canada, only 13 per cent of men and 11 per cent of women between 60 and 79 met the Canadian Physical Activity guidelines. These include 150 minutes (2.5 hours) of moderate-to-vigorous intensity aerobic physical activity weekly. This is achievable with less than a half hour of daily activity.

And while seniors aren't alone in not meeting these guidelines, they're certainly one of the most at-risk groups. Regular physical activity can provide a list of health benefits, including strengthened muscles and bones, enhanced balance and fewer aches and pains from movement.

The Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines recommend brisk walking and bike riding as examples of moderate intensity activities, but this category can also include dancing, playing sports, going on hikes, swimming and working in the garden.

Staying active can take many forms and a motivated individual should have no problem finding an activity that's enjoyable.

Getting Started

The saying "You can't teach an old dog new tricks" doesn't apply here. Even an older adult who's had a relatively sedentary life to date will benefit from heightened physical activity. It's never too late to get started. And it doesn't have to be daunting.

Take a walk around the block a few times a week. Start at a slower, comfortable pace until you're comfortable with it, and then increase the intensity or duration. Don't push yourself too hard. Exercise is only helpful when you're able to do it. Forcing yourself to be inactive while treating an injury or strain helps no one.

If you find yourself unable to participate in certain activities due to health ailments, like joint problems, for instance, or arthritis, consult with a physician who can help determine what exercise will work for your specific needs.

If you're homebound, there are still ways to stay active. Walk or march on the spot. Get equipment to help you exercise from your bed. Lift small amounts of weight to keep your upper-body muscles and joints strong.

If you're unable to meet the 150-minute marker set by the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines at first, that's okay. Limited exercise is better than none at all. Do what you can and what you're comfortable with until you reach a point where you can meet the guidelines regularly.

Remember, strengthening the body can help avoid future ailments. Strong joints and bones can reduce the likelihood of falls, fractures and outright breaks. Take proactive steps to mitigate these health concerns before they become a reality, and you'll find a much higher quality of life waiting for you.