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How can seniors benefit from cardio exercise?

Q My wife and I are in our late 60s. We hear that it is good to do some cardio exercises to stay fit and healthy. What are the benefits and what types of cardio exercise should we do?

A Cardio (or cardiovascular) exercise refers to any form of exercise that raises one's heart rate.

While regular cardio exercise is important for people of all ages, it will benefit seniors even more because of these reasons:

- **Reduced risk of stroke or heart attack:** Regular brisk walking, cycling or doing light housework will increase blood flow to the heart and boost one's overall health.

- **Better bone density:** Weight-bearing exercise such as walking or jogging can help to increase bone strength and reduce the risk of developing osteoporosis and fractures.

- **Falls prevention:** Besides improving muscle strength and bone density, exercise can also improve balance, which in turn will help to reduce the risk of falls.

- **Reduced dementia risk:** Being sedentary in later years can increase the risk of developing dementia. According to a study published in the Journal of Alzheimer's Disease, older adults who did not exercise were more likely to develop dementia than those who did.

- **Prevention or delay of diseases:** Exercise is an effective remedy for many chronic conditions. Studies show that people with arthritis, heart disease or diabetes benefit from regular exercise. It can also help in the management of high cholesterol, as keeping cholesterol levels within a healthy range can help to reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke.

- **Longer life:** According to



Regular cardio exercise, such as brisk walking, can help to increase blood flow to the heart, improve bone strength and boost one's overall health. PHOTO: ISTOCK

the World Health Organization (WHO), leading a sedentary lifestyle is one of the 10 leading causes of death and disability. Even gentle, regular exercise such as walking or swimming may increase one's lifespan by around three to five years.

- **Improvement in confidence and independence:** A study by the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society found that exercise helped the elderly improve in functional reach and balance, and reduced their fear of falling.

If we have not led active lives before, what is the best way to get started?

For seniors who have not exercised regularly previously, it is important to start gradually to avoid injuries and fatigue, which may lead to discouragement.

Beginners can consider walking, light gym exercise, swimming, taiji, yoga or even dancing.

How long and how often should seniors do cardio exercises?

The American Heart Association

guideline suggests exercising moderately for 30 minutes at least five days per week. This approach has significant proven cardiovascular benefits.

How do we know if we are exercising enough or too much?

During your activities, you should aim to exercise till you feel mildly out of breath.

To gauge whether you have exercised adequately, you can calculate your target heart rate, which is $(220 - \text{your age}) \times 60\%$.

You should stop exercising if you experience chest tightness, significant breathlessness or near fainting. It is wise to consult your doctor before you continue your exercise programme.

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