

## Seniors and Exercise

Category : Living Well

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Here's the script for Barb's recent taping of Community Focus with Dr. James Griffin It is heard at 10:15A, 2:15P, and 6:15P on KEOM 88.5 in Mesquite, Texas. This segment is entitled *Seniors and Exercise*.

**Dr. Griffin: Today's topic is about an issue that's near and dear to all of our hearts: exercise - especially for seniors. We know that exercise is important, Barb. Why is it so important for those over 65?**

Barb: Research studies keep finding new reasons for seniors to include exercises into their daily routine. Regular exercise can help to reduce stress, lower blood pressure and heart rate, and bolster our immune systems. Colorado researchers studied animals under stress and found that these animals released a hormone that seems to weaken the immune system. When the animals were regularly exercised, they released less of this hormone, even while they were stressed. Also, doctors in Arizona reported that regular, low-intensity exercises helped improve the over-all moods of older adults. It seems that these elders felt that exercise put them in a better frame of mind - less moody and grumpy.

**Dr. Griffin: In what other ways can exercise benefit the elderly?**

Barb: Currently, over 36 million Americans deal with some form of arthritis. People with chronic conditions, such as osteoarthritis, can benefit from a fitness program that improves muscular function while reducing pain and other symptoms related to their condition. Water aerobics or swimming may be one of the best forms of exercise for persons with arthritis.

Simple stretching exercises can improve flexibility and muscle tone while other exercises may improve your balance. This is really important for seniors, considering that each year, about 300,000 hospital admissions relate to falling and broken hips!

Exercise can also help improve sleep, energy and mood. Researchers in Connecticut found that those older adults who were active and seemed more positive about aging, lived about 7 years more than people who had negative attitudes. Just walking for 20 to 30 minutes a day can boost your spirits, increase your energy and positive outlook!

**Dr. Griffin: Sounds great! What about persons with Alzheimer's disease or some other dementia? What suggestions do you have about exercise for folks with memory and thinking problems? Are there any special precautions people should take?**

Barb: Excellent question, Dr. Griffin! Which leads me to the number 1 rule relating to exercise for all seniors - check with your doctor before you begin any exercise plan. Talk with your doctor about a fitness program that's right for you and your needs. Likewise, for the person with Alzheimer's disease, ask for some recommendations on different forms of exercise that would be safe, healthy

and fun! Simple modifications in the home or yard can help create a safer environment for exercise. For example, a long, sturdy railing attached along a wall or fence in the yard can help your loved one feel more secure while walking. Simple chair exercises can be fun while encouraging movement and flexibility. Tossing a light, large ball or balloons back and forth may improve muscle tone and motor skills. Leisurely strolls through a garden or nursery can be relaxing and enjoyable while reaping the benefit of walking. Or, how about a slow dance to a favorite piece of music? Exercise doesn't have to be strenuous to be effective!

Lastly, it's recommended that elders exercise routinely with a family member or friend. Not only is there safety in numbers, but a friend can offer encouragement and accountability to help us keep up with our fitness routine.

**Dr. Griffin: In addition to talking with their doctors, where can seniors get more information about exercise?**

Barb: The National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health have an extensive section on exercise for seniors in their website, [www.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.nlm.nih.gov). Call your local senior center or community park district to see what types of programs they offer.

Also, the Alzheimer's Association offers great information about exercise ideas for persons with dementia.

- Barbara Davis, MA, BS