

## Why You Should Start Strength Training ASAP

By Craig Ryan, CPT-CSN

“There’s only one way to stop your muscles from wasting away: strength training. It doesn’t matter if you’re 40 years old or 75 years old. If you don’t build muscle, you’ll lose muscle” says Dr. William Evans at Penn State University.

What happens when the body you once had at 20 years old doesn’t respond to activities the way it used to? We can’t change the fact that we will get older, but we can change HOW we will age, and the rate at which we will age. Yes folks, like most things in life, our muscles tend toward atrophy unless we do something to stop it. With the new year upon us, I would like to dedicate this article to reminding us how important strength training is and answer some frequent questions about strength training workouts.

### Why Strength Train?

Let me share a startling statistic with you. From adulthood into middle age, people lose approximately 6.6 pounds of lean muscle mass during each decade of life. Many studies show that muscle mass may decline by 20% and 40% between age 20 and age 65. This is a result of a reduction in muscle fiber number and size, which means the muscle’s strength and endurance is not as functional in older adults. The quote “use it or lose it” has solid evidence to support it. Proper stimulation of the muscle fibers, and what is called “motor units” is absolutely critical to prevent this muscle loss. Strength training appears to decelerate the adverse effects of aging.

For many years fitness was considered just aerobic, where walking, running, aerobic classes, etc. were the most popular thing on the block. Many people bought the videos to dance to Jane Fonda, Denise Austin and even Richard Simmons. Although those types of exercising are important, they were primarily focused on exercising the heart and not the other muscle tissue in the body in a way that builds lean muscle. Now we are at a point in the fitness world where most people know that strength training in some way is important for several reasons. To quote Dr. Michael Pollock from the University of Florida, “strength training increases range of joint movement, increases muscle mass, strengthens bones, muscles, tendons, ligaments, improves your ability to do everyday chores and activities, improves health and fitness, helps prevent accidents, injuries, and sickness, and speeds

rehabilitation when you do get hurt.” In addition to that, it burns more fat than aerobic activity, increases the metabolism more than aerobic activity, and is the only type of exercise that can change your genetically inclined body shape. Let me repeat that in case you read right over that statement. **Strength training is the ONLY form of exercise that can actually change your genetically predisposed body shape.**

### Commons Questions About Strength Training:

Q: I am woman and don't want to become bulky. Should I strength train or just keep doing the aerobics?

A: Strength training with weights will not make you bulky unless you want to be. It is not the weight training that makes you bulk up, it is the number of repetitions, how much weight you lift, and the types of exercises you do that determines whether you bulk up.

Q: I am older, and have never done weight training before, and now feel that it is too late to start. Would it be beneficial and safe for me to start now?

A: The answer is definitely yes, you should start now if you are healthy enough to begin. Start by lifting light weights (or whatever type of strength training you are going to do) and progress slowly. Use a fitness professional to design a safe workout program for you based on your goals and needs. Do not think that it is too late. It really never is! Strength training will prevent further bone loss and further fat accumulation around the muscles, which leads to injuries and common diseases of deconditioned elderly folks struggle with.

Q: My child is only 12 years old. Should they be starting to lift weights at this age?

A: The answer is yes and no. If done with the utmost safety, a child that is between 10-12 years old could begin a strength training program that would assist their growth and changes that are still to come in their body. If done in a manner that is unsafe (which many teenagers do) the weight training can cause significant problems in muscle and bone development as the child grows older, putting them at much greater risk of injury.

Q: How does strength training fit into my overall fitness program? Does it replace the aerobics I had been doing?

A: A strength training program, designed for muscular strength and endurance, is only one component of fitness. Cardiovascular activity (aerobic and anaerobic), a stretching routine, and nutrition are the other main components to your overall fitness program. Each of these areas need to be addressed in a person's life, and will progress both separately and together with the other components. A good personal trainer, or fitness consultant, can design a program that addresses each of these areas.

Q: How do I start a strength training program if I have never done this before?

A: If you are going to a workout club, start with a basic circuit training program using the machines they have. This will put you into a bit of a safer position than if you start in the free weight room. If you are working out at home, start with exercises that use your bodyweight, and purchase a resistance ball and a couple pairs of dumbbells that are weight appropriate for your strength level. Consider using a personal trainer to at least get you started on a program that is best for you.

Q: How many repetitions and sets should I be doing?

A: This varies greatly from person to person. (I may write an article in this magazine sometime this year on this topic alone, so be looking out for it.) Generally, a beginner exerciser should start off with a program that has many different exercises to address each of your major muscle groups. Starting out doing 1 set of each exercise is usually best, and then progressing to 2 or more sets per exercise after a little time is best. Beginners should work out anywhere between 12-20 repetitions depending on your personal fitness goals and level of conditioning. Again, a good personal trainer will know where you should be starting with regards to weight levels, sets, repetitions, and what exercises and how often to do them.

I hope this article has been helpful and helps those of you who are not currently strength training, and those who already are. Don't wait any longer, delve in and make this new year about a stronger, leaner, and healthier you! And remember, eat right and exercise smart.

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