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The Latest on Exercise

This is Health Matters, with the latest on exercise.

We know the drill; regular exercise keeps you strong, limber and healthy, but there's an even bigger plus. Exercise keeps you young. Active older people have bodies that actually resemble the bodies of much younger people.

Aging remains a mysterious process. Research documents multiple body and cellular processes that change for the worse as we age. BUT, research has not determined whether these changes are primarily due to aging and therefore are inevitable. OR, whether they're due to lifestyle. In which case, they're not inevitable.

Many studies link inactivity with body decline and disease. But a recent study looked at the issue of exercise and aging from another point of view. What did aging people who were active look like? In other words, the study separated out the effects of not moving from the effects of aging.

What they found is enlightening. British scientists looked at how the aging bodies function in a best-case scenario. They assembled data on men and women between the ages of 55 and 79 who bicycle regularly. All study participants were serious riders but not competitive. The men had to be able to ride at least 62 miles in 6 and 1/2 hours. And the women had to ride 37 miles in 5 and 1/2 hours.

The researchers certainly found a best-case scenario. Those miles at those ages is some serious riding, and indicate an extremely high degree of fitness in the study group. I'd say it's a high degree of fitness for any age group. So, this highly fit bunch of bicyclists were given an array of physical and cognitive tests. Each person's endurance capacity, muscular mass and strength was measured, along with their metabolic health, balance indicators, memory function, bone density and reflexes. The cyclists were also given a test that any one of us can take on our own. It's a timed Get up and Go test.

Here's all you do. First, you sit down in a chair. Then you stand up without using your arms, walk briskly for ten feet, turn, walk back and sit back down again. If you can do this in 5 seconds, you are well within the norm of healthy young adults. If it takes you at least 7 seconds, you're on a par with the average person over 60. If it takes you 9 seconds or more, the test rules you are approaching frailty. That was just one test among a great many. The researchers compiled the older cyclists' fitness measures and compared them with the same measures taken on younger cyclists.

On almost all measures, the older cyclists did not show their age. Physical functioning remained fairly stable across cyclists of all ages. The older cyclists were much closer in their physical and mental abilities to young adults than to people their age. If someone had to predict the age of the study participants based on the data set, they couldn't do it. On paper they all looked young. However, there were some differences between the cyclists in their 50s and 60s and those in their 70s. The 70 years plus cyclists had less muscular power and mass, and considerably lower aerobic capacities. So, age does reduce our endurance and strength to some extent, even if we exercise. BUT, those measures were way higher among the oldest cyclists than what's considered average for people over 70. Which is all the more reason why establishing an exercise routine is so important as we age.

And for all of you out there who have tried to exercise and lasted only a few weeks before settling back into sedentary habits, don't give up. The reason most people fail at exercise is because they don't enjoy it. If you pushed yourself and tried hard and didn't stick with it, try again. Only this time, find something you really like doing. If running bores you, try the gym. If a treadmill bores you, try swimming. If that doesn't work, try brisk walks in the woods, or jump roping, or bicycling back roads. If you keep trying you'll find an exercise you like doing, and it's downhill from there.

Sources and Links

http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/07/how-exercise-keeps-usyoung/?ref=health&_r=0

The Program, by Kelly Traver, M.D., Atria Books, 2009, NY, NY.