

Personal Training by Robert J. Bovee

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Strength Training for Women Through the Stages of Life

As strength training continues to grow in popularity, **especially among women**, it is important to note that particular subgroups require special care and consideration when developing strength-training programs. The older woman, the adolescent woman, the pregnant woman and the postpartum woman need some adjustment in their strength program to ensure both safety and effectiveness. While information on the impact of strength training for “special” groups of women is lacking, a limited number of guidelines and recommendations have been developed that are appropriate.

Exercise scientists and gerontologists now recognize and emphasize the importance of muscular fitness for older individuals. Impaired muscular functioning is linked to many problems observed in older adults, especially women. For instance, the typical **75**-year-old woman often does not have sufficient lower extremity muscular strength to rise effectively and efficiently from a seated position, to move from place to place or to maintain her balance. Such deficiencies can make independent living an unrealistic option.

A properly prescribed strength-training regimen can dramatically improve the overall functional abilities and well being of older women. Participation in strength-training programs aimed at enhancing lower extremity muscular fitness can lead to significant improvements in both balance and gait mechanics, and reduce a woman’s potential for falling.

In addition, many experts believe that strength training can help women effectively manage osteoarthritis. A woman’s ability to live with osteoarthritis is largely dependent upon how the stresses occurring around the joints are shared by the surrounding muscles and the unaffected joint structures. Generally speaking, stronger muscles are able to absorb a greater amount of stress on a joint.

Osteoporosis, the age-related disorder that is characterized by a decreased bone mineral content, is also influenced by strength training. A growing body of evidence suggests that resistance exercise retards bone loss and can even increase bone density. When muscle-movement stress is applied to a bone, the pressure produces an adaptive response by the bone (the piezoelectric effect). Furthermore, training-induced improvements in muscle strength and balance can prevent the falls that cause fractures in elderly osteoporotic women.

Strength training can also help preserve muscle tissue as women age. Muscle tissue is more metabolically active than fat tissue (i.e., it will burn more calories). By maintaining a higher amount of muscle tissue, women will maintain higher metabolic rates and maintain their optimal body weights.

Perhaps the most important benefit of strength training for older women is its impact on factors related to daily living. Most activities of daily living require some measurable involvement of muscular fitness. **By engaging in a sound program of strength training**, an older woman will be more likely to maintain an appropriate level of muscular fitness and, therefore, a higher level of functioning. As a consequence the likelihood that she will be able to maintain an independent lifestyle will be enhanced.

Available research suggests that strength training will also enhance self-confidence and self-worth. While the thought of “pumping iron” might seem strange to many older women, it is a fact that an appropriate level of muscular fitness is integral to ensuring that women are able to spend their later years in a self-functioning, dignified manner. The key to attaining this level of muscular fitness lies in adhering to a sound strength-training program.

For more information, please contact Robert J. Bovee at **(585) 330-0614**.