

Staying fit through the ages
Andy Baxter, Baxter Fitness Solutions

What motivates us to stay fit? It may be an intrinsic motivator, such as the personal satisfaction of committing to a program and sticking with it. Or it may be an extrinsic motivator, perhaps training for an event with the possibility of a medal to validate your hard work. As we age, our motivations to stay fit take on more profound underpinnings.

Staying fit as we age is not only a matter of maintaining or improving our appearance. It is about preserving our quality of life, our independence and, as such, life itself. Quality of life issues might be the ability to lift your grandchildren, or go on outings without having to stop and catch your breath while others wait for you. Regular exercise enhances quality of sleep, raises your metabolism to burn more calories, gives you energy, increases bone density and neuromuscular facilitation, motor skills, balance, strength and confidence, and improves heart, health, and brain function. And that's just the stuff I could list in one sentence!

Strength is the most often neglected element of fitness in the fifty-plus crowd. As we age we lose muscle mass, a condition known as Sarcopenia. Loss of muscle mass means loss of metabolically active tissue. If we are losing muscle then, by default, we are increasing our body fat percentage. Our muscles contribute to the support and stability of our joints. An arthritic knee joint, for example, needs as much muscular support as it can get, as the cartilage in that joint is compromised.

Functional strength is the real world use of our muscles. Getting out of a car, climbing stairs, getting out of the bathtub, carrying groceries, and opening a jar are all examples of functional strength. Strength training gives us the ability to perform these activities which, in turn, gives us confidence. Confidence is the antidote to our fear of falling.

The very best part of this whole discussion is that you are never too old to get fit. Eighty year old muscle will react to a load by adapting and getting stronger just as eighteen year old muscle will. Walking, as your sole form of exercise, does not provide enough range of motion or load to effectively recruit sufficient muscle mass. Remember that your fitness program should address Strength, Endurance, and Range of Motion.