

# Exercise for the Frail Elderly

## There are so many benefits to even moderate exercise that it should not be overlooked, even for the frail elderly.

There is an endless variety of heart-pumping, strength-building and balance-improving activities that may work for the frail elderly. What works best for an individual will depend upon a number of factors, including functional skills, available resources, and perhaps most importantly, what forms of exercise are the most enjoyable for the individual and can be sustained.

Keep in mind that it is important to talk to one's doctor before beginning a new exercise program. There may be other factors--such as osteoporosis, a heart condition, or a balance problem (possibly due to medication)--that could limit or restrict activity.

A doctor may make recommendations about:

- The types of exercise best suited to a person and those to avoid
- The intensity of the workout
- The duration of the workout and any physical limitations

The initial frequency of an exercise routine can be as short as 6 minutes, repeated throughout the day. (Documented benefits in frail elders have resulted from as little as 30 cumulative minutes of exercise a week.) Try to keep specific times each day reserved for exercise, as this routine will help foster a longer-term commitment to the exercises.

## Aerobic Exercises

Exercise should not be painful. If whole body movement is not initially possible, start with exercises from a seated position. Check out [Collage Video](#) or [Arm Chair Fitness](#) online for seated exercise video tapes.

If whole body movement is possible, consider low impact exercises such as:

- Walking
- Swimming or water aerobics
- Bowling
- Dancing
- Yoga
- Tai Chi



*Serving Central New Hampshire and the Lakes Region*

365 Lake Street • Bristol, NH 03222

**(603) 217-0149**

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## Resistance Exercises

Resistance training is meant to increase muscle strength and can be as simple as using elastic bands of various tensile strengths. Exercise bands are inexpensive and versatile (there are many possible exercises to use them for) and a great way to get started with resistance exercise. Exercise bands can be purchased at several area stores, as well as online at [Perform Better](#) and [Power-Systems](#). According to the classic April 2002 issue of the Journal of Gerontology: Biological Sciences, resistance training exercise just one day a week can give older adults the strength to maintain their independence and to avoid injuries.

## Flexibility Exercises

Stretching to increase flexibility and freedom of movement will help frail seniors do more of the activities they enjoy. Yoga is an excellent way to incorporate stretching, and is sometimes offered at senior centers or local recreation centers. Simple stretches before and after exercise will also help to prevent injuries. It is important to stretch slowly into the desired position, as far as possible without pain, and hold the stretch for 10 to 30 seconds.

## Exercise for Those with Alzheimer's Disease

The type and intensity of exercise appropriate for someone with Alzheimer's disease depends on the person's degree of impairment. People in the early stages of the disease may enjoy exercises such as walking, bowling, dancing, golf, and swimming, although supervision may be necessary. Greater supervision may be required as the disease progresses, and activities that could lead to injury should be avoided.

Repetitive exercises—including walking, indoor bicycling, and activities such as folding laundry—may decrease anxiety in people with Alzheimer's disease because they don't have to make decisions about the activity or remember what to do next.

Baby toys can be a good option for keeping seniors active while encouraging hand-eye coordination. These toys are generally colorful, easy to grasp, and mind-stimulating.

Soft clay-like products or hand-held exercise balls can be squeezed to help strengthen the hands.

## Ways to Encourage and Reinforce Exercise for Frail Elderly Patients

**Make it fun:** Think of favorite hobbies and how those can be utilized as exercise, or add music to the exercise environment.

**Make it social:** Promote exercise in groups whenever possible or create virtual groups using videotapes.

**Make it sustainable:** Choose affordable exercise options and set aside brief, dedicated time periods for exercise daily.

**Make it a priority:** Think of exercise as a prescribed health intervention and enlist reinforcement from family or caregivers.

At Live Free Home Health Care, we work gently with clients to incorporate appropriate daily exercises and some simple lifestyle changes. In addition to providing care, we can help improve a client's mobility and thus increase independence.

*Tips courtesy of US News Health, Medscape and the National Institute of Health*