BY JIM MILLER

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Can lifting weights help with age-related health problems?

A growing body of research shows that strength-training exercises can have a profound impact on a person's health as they age — and you're never too old to start.

Regular strength training, done at least two nonconsecutive days a week, helps you build muscle strength, increases your bone density and improves your balance, coordination and stamina. It can also help reduce the signs and symptoms of many chronic conditions like arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, back pain, depression and obesity. And, some studies even show that it helps improve cognitive function, too.

Safety First

For the most part, strength-training exercises — especially if you start conservatively and progress slowly — are safe for most seniors, even those with serious health conditions.

But, if you have health concerns or if you are currently inactive, you should talk to your doctor about what may be appropriate for you.

A good self-help resource to help find a safe exercise program is the “Exercise and Screening for You” at www.easyforyou.info.

Getting Started

If you’ve never done strength-training exercises before, you may want to work with a personal trainer for a few sessions to help you develop a safe and effective routine you can continue on your own. They cost anywhere from $20 to $100 per hour.

To find one, ask your health care provider or contact a good health club or fitness facility in your area. You can also search for one online at reputable sites like acefitness.org or www.idea-fit.com.

If personal training isn’t an option, there are lots of great senior strength-training videos you can purchase to guide you through a wide variety of exercises that you can do at home. Collage Video (www.collagevideo.com, 800-819-7111) sells dozens of age- and fitness-appropriate DVDs at prices usually ranging between $10 and $20.

Also, see go4life.nia.nih.gov, a resource created by the National Institute on Aging that offers a free exercise DVD and guide that provides illustrated examples of exercises you can do at home to strengthen your body. You can order your free copies online or by calling 800-222-2225.

Senior Classes

If you don't like exercising alone or need some motivation, consider joining a gym, or call your local senior center to see if they offer any strength-training exercise classes. You should also check out SilverSneakers (www.silversneakers.com, 888-423-4632) or Silver&Fit (silverandfit.com, 877-427-4788). These are fitness programs offered in thousands of fitness centers, gyms and YMCAs throughout the U.S. that offer special classes designed for older adults.

These programs are available only to seniors that have certain Medicare supplemental policies or Medicare Advantage plans.

Equipment

If you workout at home, you'll probably need to invest in some equipment.

While some strength training can be done using your own body weight (like push-ups, sit-ups and leg squats), hand weights, ankle weights, medicine balls, resistance bands or rubber tubing are all great tools for strength training. You can find all these products at sporting goods stores, or online at amazon.com for around $10 or less.

Cans of soup, water bottles or plastic milk containers filled with water or sand could also be used (like small hand weights) for resistance.

Another great strength-training tool you should know about is the Resistance Chair (it costs $280). This is an all-in-one home fitness system that helps seniors maintain and improve their strength from a safe seated position with minimal risk of injury. To learn more about the Resistance Chair, see vqactioncare.com or call 800-585-4920.

Jim Miller is a contributor to the NBC Today show and author of "The Savvy Senior."