

The secret to good health as you age?

Get Moving

By Linda Holderness

The real fountain of youth may be physical activity. And it's never too late to start



Above: Arnold Sanchez, 81, works out at a gym every day. Right: Getting fit can be fun when it involves dancing

Leah Emery, in her late 60s, learned a few years ago she had a heart murmur. Her doctor's prescription: aerobics. Emery started moving, including once-a-week line dancing at the El Dorado Hills Senior Center, and now, she reports, the murmur is gone.

Coral Miller came up with her own prescription. At 82, walking with a cane and dependent on a slew of meds, she told her doctor she was tired of being "an invalid" and

was trading in her pills for a new lifestyle. Today, at 88, Miller walks unaided and works out at her gym five days a week. She is 40 pounds lighter and takes only one pill.

Gail Kipp, 83, first joined a gym a couple of years ago – not for herself but to help her husband, Earl, 88, who has joint problems and frequently falls. Too weak to get him up, she had to rely on the fire department until she started a workout program. Now, she says, "I am able to help him



up myself.”

Miller and Emery eagerly embrace their active lifestyles; Kipp, not so much, but as a former self-described couch potato – “Earl jogged and I sat at home and waited for him” – she acknowledges the benefits. She has improved not only her strength but her balance and flexibility and is thinner and toned. Her seniors gym group also provides social support. She rarely misses a session.

Each of these women had her own motive for exercising, and each has a different style. But they share results: They are in excellent health at ages when many have become slow and uncertain.

Current medical and scientific literature strongly supports exercise – almost anything that gets people moving – to help seniors live longer and remain independent and mentally sharp. The universal message: It’s never too late to start and any amount is beneficial.

MedlinePlus, a website for the U.S. National Library of Medicine, calls exercise “a fountain of youth.” The site lists four essentials of an exercise program for seniors: endurance activities like walking; strengthening exercises to build muscle; stretching to keep the body limber; and balance workouts to reduce chances of a fall.

Exercise may not turn back the clock, but it can prevent or reduce

common markers of aging. A Nurses’ Health Study in 2010 reported that the likelihood of living past 70 in good physical and mental health was nearly double for the most active participants compared to sedentary ones. The active seniors also were free of 10 major chronic illnesses, including cancer, heart disease and diabetes.

Some research targets specific medical results. A 2009 study at the Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany, showed that women 65 and older who participated in an intense exercise program “significantly improved their bone mineral density.”

At McMaster University in Canada, researchers found 30 minutes a week of high-intensity intermittent exercise lowered blood sugar levels in Type 2 diabetics. And a new study from the University of New Hampshire found

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that long-distance runners over age 60 used oxygen as efficiently as younger runners.

A local exercise proponent who needs no convincing is Stanley Geel, a physical therapist with a Ph.D. in physiology. He doesn’t mince words: “Exercise,” he states, “is the most powerful anti-aging prescription there is.”

At 78, Geel walks his passionate talk. He and his wife, Joan, 70, both taut and energetic, lead exercise classes for older adults – the oldest is 91 – twice a week at a Placerville studio. Their workout equipment in-

Well-being may hang on balance

Of all the statistics on aging, none seem so grim as the numbers associated with falls. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, falls are the leading cause of injury death among adults 65 and older and are the most common cause of traumatic brain injury.

To help prevent falls, health practitioners who serve older adults encourage workouts to improve balance.

Here are some suggested exercises from Stanley and Joan Geel and the Mayo Clinic:

- Eyes closed, stand on one leg, then the other, and repeat.
- Put a pillow under one or both feet to create instability and lift feet alternately.
- Walk in a straight line while turning your head from side to side; try with your eyes closed.
- Stand on alternate legs and lift the opposite arm while holding a dumbbell palm up.
- Hands on hips, squat briefly as if you’re sitting in a chair, first lifting one leg, then the other.

cludes weights, resistance cords and flexibility balls.

"There is overwhelming evidence that strength training and conditioning improve quality of life," Geel says. "That old myth that older people are fragile and frail? That's a total myth. People in their 80s and 90s ... can improve their strength equivalent to people much younger."

The Geels are real-life emissaries for their mes-

sage. Stan Geel returned to school at age 50 to study physical therapy at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota.

In 1994, in his 60s, he founded the physical therapy degree program at Sacramento State and was its first director and department chairman.

Now theoretically retired, the Geels own Sun Mountain Farm in Apple Hill, primarily selling grapes to wineries.

As if the Geels weren't already getting plenty of exercise, they also work out at a gym in Placerville. They don't plan to stop.

"More than 50 percent of (seniors') chronic conditions are a result of inactivity," Stan Geel says.

One octogenarian who proves Geel's maxim that older people are not intrinsically frail is Arnold Sanchez, who turns 82 in May. With broad shoulders and a narrow waist, Sanchez's strong physique evokes that of late fitness guru Jack LaLanne.

Sanchez works out every day, two to three hours, lifting weights and

doing aerobics at a gym in Shingle Springs. He also holds his own on a tennis or volleyball court.

Surprisingly, he doesn't gush about exercise. "It's not that I love working out," he says. "There are times when I have to push myself to come in (to the gym). But it has become such a habit that if I don't do it, I don't feel right."

If there's a secret to Sanchez's extreme success, it's one most seniors can't share: He's

been working out this hard since he was a teenager.

"I was so skinny when I was a kid," he says. "Somebody advised me that I could build muscle if I pumped iron. I started at the YMCA, \$15 a year back then, and never stopped."

For a time, he lifted competitively, managing 500 pounds with his 150-pound frame.

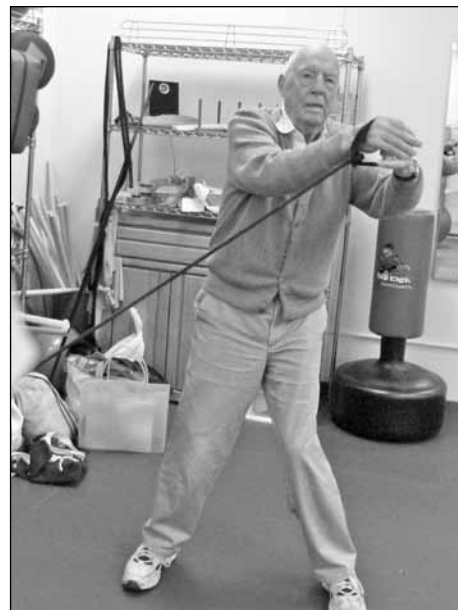
Sanchez knows of only one childhood friend who is as active as he is, and that friend lifts weights, too.

Sanchez's commitment and results are inspiring, but medical practitioners convey a more moderate message to seniors who started too late to follow Sanchez's model: Any amount of movement at any age will help.

Donna Rixman left her stock broker career 10 years ago to teach beginner and chair yoga – the chairs for people who are less steady or disabled. Her oldest student to date: 92.

While Rixman's classes are not

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Top: 91-year-old Herb Blossom works out with a resistance cord; Joan and Stan Geel after a class

strenuous, participants improve everyday functions, such as tying their shoes or catching themselves before they fall. Yoga can benefit cardiovascular health, respiratory capacity and digestive functioning, Rixman says, and with its emphasis on breathing and body awareness, it often improves mental health as well.

One exercise that can benefit anyone of any age – and has the

advantage of being free – is walking. Is it a perfect exercise for seniors? Read the sidebar below.

Sanchez and Kipp may not refer to exercise as fun, but that doesn't mean it can't be.

The first thing you notice when you walk in on the Thursday afternoon line-dancing class at the El Dorado Hills Senior Center is everybody's smiling. The second is that

everyone looks fit.

On a recent Thursday, 15 mature dancers followed their 83-year-old instructor, Pat Nathan, as they

stepped and twirled for more than an hour to the beat of oldies music.

Can such a good time give a good

workout? "It really gets our hearts going," says Shelley Mills, trim at 58. "Look at me," exclaims Ellin Black, who won't tell her age but admits

Mastering dance or exercise patterns gives the brain a cognitive workout

Is walking the perfect exercise?

Placerville physical therapist Marian Fitzpatrick works with clients – often with doctor's prescriptions – on arthritis problems, balance and other types of weakness or flexibility needs.

But when she talks about exercise for older people, one topic takes center stage: walking.

"The values of walking are huge," she says. "Walking involves balance, strength, endurance. It brings together all the parts of someone's fitness."

Although walking may not seem as rigorous as running or weight training, its list of potential benefits is long: lower triglycerides, cholesterol and blood pressure; weight loss; improved mood; slower memory decline; even a reduced risk of some cancers.

Moreover, nearly anyone can walk. It doesn't require special equipment, it's free and it can be

accomplished to good effect in brief time spurts. Bouts of walking as short as 10 minutes three times a day have been shown to be beneficial.

"You don't have to take a long walk all at one time to improve your health," Fitzpatrick says.

It's never too late to start a walking program. Subjects who are the least fit gain the most benefit when they start walking.

Seniors who walk might note their speed. The Jan. 4, 2011, issue of Scientific American reports that measures of walking speed, along with age and gender, can predict life expectancy as well as complex medical tests do.

Several groups in the area walk for exercise, and they're great for socializing while moving. But you don't need them. Just dress for the weather and step out your front door.

she's a grandmother. "I'm dripping sweat."

Though the dancers say the steps are simple, they look complicated to a visitor. And therein lies another key to the program's value. Learning complex routines not only boosts heart rate and muscle tone but also improves another area of fitness: the mind.

Mastering dance or exercise patterns gives the brain a cognitive workout, which, according to Livestrong.com, a partner of the Lance Armstrong Foundation, may help decrease the chances of dementia by as much as 30 to 50 percent. Plus, the aerobic effect on circulation and respiratory function physically benefits the brain.

The bottom line? Sitting is bad for your body and your brain. Medical research and experts agree: Get moving. It's never too late. And it's fun.

Contact information for some of the senior exercise programs:

El Dorado Hills Senior Center (chair yoga, balance classes, line dancing, arthritis walking, more): 916-358-3575.

Folsom Senior Center (walking, tai chi, yoga, aquacise, more): 916-351-3510.

The Geels: sunmountain@directcon.net

Thank you Millennium Sports-Club in Shingle Springs for arranging the Arnold Sanchez interview.

(Linda Holderness is a freelance writer based in Folsom. She has an M.A. in health studies.)