



EXERCISE AND THE MATURE ATHLETE

Maintaining independence is paramount for older adults, including financial, physical, and mental stability. Major health problems the mature population often face can include arthritis, high blood pressure, heart disease, lung disease, depression, and hearing and sight loss. With the exception of hearing and sight loss, all of these problems can potentially improve in the mature athlete with a controlled exercise program.

All mature athletes should have a comprehensive medical and musculoskeletal evaluation prior to beginning any exercise program. These examinations and subsequent medical and exercise counseling may prevent catastrophic health events and injuries. The evaluation should satisfy the mature athlete's needs for disease prevention, endurance, strength, body image, and competitiveness.

How can exercise benefit the mature athlete?

Creating a specialized program with a qualified healthcare professional can improve flexibility, balance, endurance, and strength. If the exercise program includes sports, such as golf or tennis, technique education by qualified instructors may also be useful for performance and injury prevention. To achieve results, any program must be done consistently for at least 30–45 minutes, three to four days per week. If there are physical conditions that need correction, a cardiac, pulmonary, or physical therapy rehabilitative program may be helpful before beginning an exercise program. These rehabilitation programs should instruct the mature athlete to a fitness level where they may then pursue their own program.

EXERCISE AND THE MATURE ATHLETE



What type of exercises should a program include?

The types of exercises an individual takes on should be based on the athlete's desires, pre-existing conditions, and the ability to exercise pain-free. For individuals with lower extremity joint issues, such as arthritis or instability, it is best to avoid repetitive impact activities like running. Athletes with shoulder disabilities should avoid repetitive overhead activities, such as military presses and pull-ups. Using multiple types of activities to enhance strength can allow for even better muscle and tendon tissue recovery.

If the mature adult desires to play a sport which may aggravate pre-existing muscle, tendon, or bone problems, they should be in good condition prior to performing the sport. A decrease in the frequency of the sport may decrease painful symptoms.

What types of equipment will the mature athlete need?

Wearing shoes that match the specific exercise and/or sport program can be beneficial. If the individual's foot has significant deformity, such as flat feet (fallen arches), the use of foot orthotics can decrease stress on the entire lower extremity. Symptoms from arthritic changes in the knee may be decreased through the use of specialized braces.

How can the mature athlete prevent injury or discomfort during exercise?

Any discomfort during or after exercise should be investigated to prevent recurrence or worsening. Over-the-counter pain relievers and anti-inflammatory medications can be used short-term if there are no adverse interactions with other medical conditions. Additionally, the use of ice, heat, massage, and flexibility programs can relieve many exercise-induced symptoms. More aggressive treatments with narcotic analgesics and/or cortisone injections should be reserved to treat a specific injury and not simply to allow for short-term competition.

Summary

By working together with a medical and/or exercise professional to create a tailored program, the mature athlete can maintain independence, increase physical capabilities, prevent injury, and add significantly to one's quality of life.

Expert Consultant

Paul R. Reiman, MD