Tapping into the Seniors Market: Key Exercise Elements for Success

By Margot McKinnon

Are you ready to embark on the adventure of training senior clients? A largely untapped market, seniors are a fascinating group to work with, because of their needs and goals. By incorporating the key exercise elements outlined below, we, as exercise professionals, can make a significant impact on the quality of life our seniors enjoy.

Our Senior Clients

When we define “senior client” we start with chronological age and then must consider how aspects of aging—physical, mental, social—affect an individual in relation to other individuals of the same chronological age. The World Health Organization (WHO) divides older adults based on an health-fitness gradient:

i) Physically fit, healthy.
ii) Physically unfit, unhealthy, independent.
iii) Physically unfit, frail, unhealthy, dependent.

They state that groups one and two will benefit most from specialized exercise programs because of their independence and that age 50 marks a point in middle age when benefits of regular physical activity can be most relevant in avoiding, minimizing, and/or reversing many physical, psychological, and social problems which often accompany advancing age.

What Seniors Want From Exercise

1. Physical comfort, pain relief
2. Mobility/strength for daily activities
3. Improved balance
4. Improved posture
5. Social interaction

Why Seniors Need to Keep Moving

New research shows our bodies break down because we become less active as we age. It seems the first signs of decline are...
more a function of lifestyle than DNA. In fact, chronic disease and sedentary habits rather than the aging process are proving to be the reasons for the body’s progressive decline.

The composition and function of our soft tissue is one area of significant change. In short, we lose muscle tissue and gain fat. This negatively affects strength, endurance, metabolic rate, bone density, body composition, functional abilities and posture. Fortunately, many age and disuse-related declines in muscle function can be reversed or slowed with endurance and resistance training. Coupled with consideration for conditions like osteoporosis, osteoarthritis, heart disease and diabetes to name a few, we can design dynamic exercise programs for seniors that are safe, fun and effective. So, if you keep using it, you will be well into middle age before you start losing it!

**Build Strength in Balance Muscles**

Balance is defined as the process of controlling the body’s centre of gravity in relation to its base of support, whether stationary or moving. The muscles primarily responsible for maintaining uprightness and balance against gravity include abdominals, erector spinae, ilopsoas, gluteus medius and TFL, tibialis anterior, gastrocnemius and soleus. Exercise programs for seniors should therefore target these muscle groups in as many ways as possible so balance improves.

**Enhance Stability Limits**

Stability limits are the amounts we are able to lean in any direction without having to take a step to avoid falling. Three distinct postural control strategies modulate the amount the body sways and by teaching exercises to enhance these strategies, balance issues can be greatly reduced.

1. **Ankle Strategy:** The person leans and the whole body sways in the same direction around the ankle. Teach ankle dorsiflexion and sensory exercises for feet.

2. **Hip Strategy:** The person leans forward or back by hinging at the hips-like taking a bow. Teach lunges and squats to increase hip stability and mobility.

3. **Step Strategy:** Maximum stability limit is surpassed and the person must take a step to re-establish a base of support. Teach mobility and stability for ankles, knees and hips.

**Floor to Standing Transfers**

Including floor to standing transfers in your program plan is essential. Weight transfer exercises help seniors gain confidence in their ability to get up and down. Begin by moving from supine or prone to side-lying to side-lying. Clients with osteoporosis or herniated discs must roll like a log to the side-lying position.

**Multisensory Training**

Sensory training is another way to improve balance in healthy older adults. Exercise sequences progress from easy to difficult by altering body position (change of foot or head position), infusing different movements, changing vision fields (keeping eyes open or closed) and changing support surface (standing on thick or thin mats, balance cushion or pad or wobble boards).

**Gravity Control**

Exercise progressions that focus on creating changes in the physical environment make balance training fun. They help clients learn to use their core support to maintain their balance. One example is sitting on a stability ball and then making small changes like adding movements for the arms, head, spine and legs. Progress to bounce on the balls so there are dynamic weight shifts.

**Emphasize Functional Fitness**

Seniors exercise so they can get on with their lives. One way to plan classes relevant to their needs is to organize exercises to mimic everyday tasks and activities. This is one definition of functional fitness.

Functional movement involves compound movements that involve more than one joint. For example, pushing with the arms is a typical daily activity. Pushing is considered a compound movement because it involves the shoulder, elbow, wrist and hand.

The chart above summarizes basic movements of everyday life by area of the body. It can be a checklist to help guide us as we design exercise sequences. Ask yourself the following question for each of the movements listed: “What exercises do I know that simulate these movements?”. Then, make a list and put the exercises in a logical order working from lower to upper body.

**EXERCISE ACTION PLAN FOR SENIORS**

- Have clients fill out a detailed health history. A PAR-Q is the minimum and only applicable to clients under 70. The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology has produced a PAR-Q+ form covering additional health issues often experienced by older adults.
- Conduct an assessment using this Senior Fitness test: www.topendsports.com/testing/senior-fitness-test.htm
- Teach exercises that mimic functional activities of daily life.
- Include balance training.
- Encourage lots of social interaction!

**PROTECT YOURSELF**

Find out what your insurance requirements are and cover yourself.

**RECOMMENDED RESOURCES**

**Books**


**Websites**

- www.humankinetics.com/aacc-home
- www.pilatesplus.com
- www.humankinetics.com/aacc-home
- www.pilatesplus.com
- www.humankinetics.com/aacc-home
- www.canfitpro.com
- www.humankinetics.com/aacc-home
- www.topendsports.com/testing/senior-fitness-test.htm
- www.firststepstovitality.com
- www.stopfalls.org
- www.icaa.cc

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**Margot McKinnon, B.A., B.Ed., M.Ed. has twenty years of experience in the fields of Fitness and Wellness, Pilates and Teacher Education. She is a founder and lead educator at BODY HARMONICS (www.body-harmonics.com) offering three levels of pilates certification, and over 30 workshops in specialized training for functional movement, anatomy, and special populations.**