

Seniors who exercise regularly experience less physical decline as they age

June 2 2014, by Diamond Dixon

The majority of adults aged 65 and older remains inactive and fails to meet recommended physical activity guidelines, previous research has shown. However, these studies have not represented elders living in retirement communities who may have more access to recreational activities and exercise equipment. Now, researchers at the University of Missouri found that older adults in retirement communities who reported more exercise experienced less physical decline than their peers who reported less exercise, although many adults—even those who exercised—did not complete muscle-strengthening exercises, which are another defense against physical decline.

"Physical decline is natural in this age group, but we found that people who exercised more declined less," said Lorraine Phillips, an associate professor in the MU Sinclair School of Nursing. "The most popular physical activities the residents of the retirement community reported doing were light housework and walking, both of which are easily integrated into individuals' daily lives, but these exercises are not the best choices for maintaining muscle strength."

Phillips and her colleagues studied the physical activity of 38 residents at TigerPlace, an independent-living community in Columbia, four times in one year. The researchers tested the residents' walking speed, balance and their ability to stand up after sitting in a chair. Then, researchers compared the results of the tests to the residents' self-reported participation in exercise. Phillips found that residents who reported doing more exercise had more success maintaining their physical

abilities over time.

Phillips says the national recommendations for exercise include muscle strengthening exercises, such as knee extensions and bicep curls. Most of the study participants did not report completing these types of activities despite daily opportunities for [recreational activities](#) and access to [exercise equipment](#). Phillips says [muscle strength](#) is important to individuals of this age group in order for them to maintain their ability to conduct everyday activities such as opening jars, standing up from chairs and supporting their own bodyweight.

"For older individuals, walking may represent the most familiar and comfortable type of physical activity," Phillips said. "Muscle-strengthening exercises should be promoted more aggressively in retirement communities and made more appealing to residents."

To combat the lack of [physical activity](#) among seniors, Phillips says health care providers should discuss exercise programs with their patients and share the possible risks associated with their lack of [exercise](#), such as losing their ability to live independently. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, individuals 65 years of age and older that have no limiting health conditions should do muscle-strengthening activities that work all major muscle groups at least two days a week.

Phillips' research, "Retirement Community Residents' Physical Activity, Depressive Symptoms, and Functional Limitations," was published in *Clinical Nursing Research*.

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