

Strength training still advisable in older age

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In Austria, around ten per cent of over-65-year-olds are frail, while a further 40 per cent are in a preliminary stage of frailty. The Healthy For Life project, with the MedUni Vienna as the academic lead, aims to raise fitness levels and quality of life for older people whose nutritional condition is inadequate. The first results show that regular strength training is particularly beneficial for increasing hand strength, and thus enabling people to live independently, says Thomas Dorner of the MedUni Vienna's Centre for Public Health to mark World Health Day this coming Tuesday (7 April).

The Healthy For Life project is a collaboration between the MedUni

Vienna, Wiener Hilfswerk and Sportunion Österreich and is sponsored by the Vienna Science and Technology Fund. It involves volunteer "buddies" (aged at least 50) making weekly home visits to motivate [older people](#) to do [strength training](#). Other nutritional issues are also discussed and it also boosts social support. It's a win-win situation: "it is not only beneficial to the [elderly people](#)'s health, but also does the younger buddies good."

The first results, to be presented at the project's forthcoming "sustainability conference", are clear: training enables the older people to be more independent. Says Dorner: "We know that muscle mass decreases from the age of 30. Without training, around 50 per cent of muscle mass has deteriorated by the age of 80. In this study, the [intervention group](#) boosted their maximum [hand strength](#) by three kilograms. That is an increase of almost 20 per cent on the initial measurements. There was also a significant increase in [physical activity levels](#), mobility, quality of life and cognitive functions. Albumin, a nutritional parameter for protein in blood serum, which is frequently at low levels in the frail elderly, was significantly increased.

Muscle training also reduces the risk of falls – an important factor given the high number of osteoporosis patients in Austria: around 740,000 people aged over 50 are affected, most of them women. Dorner stresses that "the fear of falls was significantly reduced in the intervention group. This is very important, because the fear of falling leads to frail people moving less, and thus further depleting their muscular strength and increasing the risk of falls."

The buddies, who trained alongside the elderly people also significantly increased their hand and leg strength during this period.

An interesting aspect of principle is that although general life expectancy is higher in women than in men, the proportion of healthy years of life is

higher in men across the EU (79 per cent) than in women (74 per cent). Chronic illness is more common in women than men, and they also consider their state of health to be worse.

"A combination of good nutrition with enough plant and animal protein to maintain [muscle mass](#), and regular physical training to promote muscle [strength](#) can boost the number of healthy years," says the MedUni Vienna expert. Then there is the fact that many frail people live alone and no longer leave their homes. "An active social life and social contacts are important factors in remaining independent for as long as possible," explains Dorner.

Provided by Medical University of Vienna

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