

Gentle exercise classes – nothing to lose and much to gain

'But people of our age just don't do that sort of thing,' 72-year-old Teresa protested when her neighbour suggested she join the gentle exercise class at the local community centre. 'I've already had one fall – what if it makes me fall over again?'

'But that's the good thing about gentle exercise classes! My doctor says gentle exercise helps prevent injuries from falls,' said her neighbour. 'It helps makes your bones stronger and less likely to break.' Like Teresa, many older people don't realise that gentle exercise can benefit their health. But once you learn the movements, they are simple and, like walking or swimming, gentle exercise can make a big difference. Besides helping prevent injuries from falls, these activities help older people stay stronger and more mobile. This means they can continue to do the things they enjoy – like meeting friends, gardening, and playing with grandchildren.

What happens at a gentle exercise class?

In some suburbs, gentle exercise classes are available with bilingual instructors. It's not like the gym. There's no running, fast movements or jumping up and down – just simple movements that are as easy as walking. These movements improve muscle strength and flexibility. There's no need to wear special clothes when you go to the class – just something loose that doesn't restrict movement, and comfortable walking shoes. Besides improving your health, gentle exercise classes and other group activities are great ways to meet people and make new friends.

How does exercise make you healthier?

- Bones may become more fragile with age, especially in women. Gentle exercise can help strengthen bones so they're less likely to break.
- Gentle exercise improves circulation, making it easier for the blood to carry oxygen to all parts of the body. This helps the body work better.
- Gentle exercise makes muscles stronger and joints more flexible, so it's easier to do everyday tasks.

What if someone has arthritis or back pain – can they do gentle exercise?

Yes. Instructors are trained to help people with health problems do these exercises without causing harm. Because gentle exercise improves strength and flexibility, it may reduce symptoms of arthritis and back pain.

What if someone is very old and frail – isn't it too late to begin gentle exercise?

No. Doctors say it's never too late to become more active, and experience the benefits of gentle exercise. Older people who have had difficulty getting out of chairs, or have difficulty walking can benefit from gentle exercise, and be more active and happier as a result. If you have been unwell, or if you take medication,

check with your doctor first. Some types of medication may make you dizzy if you bend or move too quickly – but your doctor may be able to change your medication so you can become more active.

What exercise can I do if I can't go to gentle exercise classes?

Walking, working in the garden, tai chi, yoga – even doing 'heavier' household chores like sweeping floors or cleaning windows are all good. The important thing is to try and to do at least 30 minutes of exercise every day.

How can I find out about gentle exercise classes, or other activities such as walking groups?

To find out what's on in your area, contact your local Community Health Centre (listed under 'C' in the White Pages of the phone book).

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>