

## A “magic pill” for seniors

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Perhaps the two things seniors fear most are the loss of their mental abilities and loss of their physical independence. In 1513, the Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León searched Florida for the Fountain of Youth. Today, too many of our seniors are looking for a “magic pill.” Lucky for you, I actually have a “magic pill” for you. The bad news is I cannot write a prescription for you to take to the drug store.

Inactivity becomes a perfect set-up for the elderly to decrease mental function, to lose personal mobility, to increase the chances of falling, and to make fractures more likely.

In 2008, Dr. Elizabeth Coulson, at the University of Queensland in Australia, published a study which provides additional support for the idea of “use it or lose it” for brain function. Dr. Coulson said, “It appears that if a cell is not appropriately stimulated by other cells, it self-destructs.”

This is supported by a 3-month study from the Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas, which was published on April 12, 2011 in “ScienceDaily”, suggesting that “brisk walking for 30-50 minutes three or four times per week improved blood flow through to the brain as much as 15%” for women age 60 and older.

As many of you know, one of my favorite sayings is “motion is lotion.” Patients often think they are protecting a painful joint by not moving it. In reality, non-movement can increase the likelihood of cartilage deterioration. There is no blood supply to cartilage. Movement of the joints is the only way to supply the joint fluid to the cartilage to keep it healthy.

According to the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons, without regular use, muscle size and strength will decrease, along with bone mass and density. Joints become inflamed. Cartilage degenerates, and tendons and ligaments become less elastic, unless we are actually using them regularly.

My older patients actually fear loss of independence more than death from a stroke or heart attack. In this respect, prevention of osteoporosis and related spine and hip fractures is every bit as important to them as any other health concern.

Everyone’s overall bone quality is related to a combination of muscle strength, motion, and weight-bearing, regardless of other genetic tendencies for osteoporosis. As seniors continue to age, their bone density tends to decrease. Fortunately, weight-bearing exercise, such as walking and cycling, has the potential to dramatically slow this type of bone loss.

Maintaining back and abdominal muscle strength helps to reduce falls and protect the spine from gradual long-term deterioration. Researchers have found that participating in a low impact program such as tai chi improves trunk muscle tone and enhances balance, helping to prevent falls. If you are not a “tai chi” person, simply walking in a swimming pool several days a week works well, too.

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No matter what your age or current physical condition, studies have shown that doing a moderate amount of almost any type of exercise regularly will start to make a difference in just a few weeks.

We know continuing to be active does make a difference. Hazel McCallion, age 90, has been mayor of Mississauga, Ontario--a city with a population of 729,000--since 1978, winning her most recent mayoral election in October, 2010. Her mind is still amazingly sharp. She does her own grocery shopping, cleaning, cooking, and gardening, and uses an i-Pad. She even keeps her ice skates in her car so she can skate out on the ice to drop the puck for local hockey team games.

Obviously, the sooner you start, the better your chances are of slowing down the natural process of aging. Thus, that “magic pill” so many patients are seeking is really just a simple, regular exercise program.

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