

Older Adults Training: Improving Strength and Balance to Maximize Independence  
By Carol Levy, Co-owner of [BigBand Fitness](#), LLC

Despite all we know about the benefits of exercise, approximately 60 percent of older adults remain inactive. As inactive individuals age, they lose balance, joint mobility and strength, which eventually impedes their ability to perform everyday activities such as walking, cleaning, shopping and dressing. This loss of ability to perform every day tasks hastens loss of their independence.

The statistics on aging and strength loss paint a shocking picture. Between age 30 and 50, the average individual loses more than 40 percent of strength in their hand, trunk and leg muscles, and more than 30 percent in their arm and back muscles. After the age of 50, strength continues to decline at a rate of 12-15 percent a decade. It's no wonder that 20 percent of men and 66% of women past age 74 can't lift a ten pound bag of groceries!

Weak muscles also make it hard to balance the body, thus increasing the likelihood of falling. As people age, they often lose flexibility and experience decline in kinesthetic awareness, the ability to know where the body is in space. Many older adults will tell you that their biggest fear is falling. This fear is not unfounded - thirty-three percent of those over the age of 65 fall each year, and the risk of falling increases to 300% in the year following a fall. Twenty-five percent of those who suffer a fracture as the result of a fall never re-gain their independence and 10 percent die.

Here's the good news. . . Studies show that people of ALL ages can improve their strength, balance and range of motion, thereby maximizing their independence. In a study involving nursing home residents age 80 and over, the residents progressed from using walkers to canes after just ten weeks of simple exercises. Several studies have shown that both healthy older adults and those with balance problems can make moderate to great improvements in their balance and mobility and reduce their risk of falling.

Older adults KNOW they should exercise, yet most choose to remain sedentary. When asked why they avoid exercise, many sedentary individuals say they are fearful of getting started in an exercise program – they try to reduce their risk of injury by avoiding any situations that might result in a fall. Unfortunately, the long term effect of this strategy has just the opposite result.

An effective way to overcome reluctance to exercise is to educate the older adult about the specific “real world” benefits that come from various activities. They should know: (1) increased ankle range of motion makes stumbling less likely and shoulder range of motion allows them to comb the back of their hair; (2) strengthening the trunk and neck means better posture and strengthening leg muscles keeps them able to walk, climb stairs, and get in and out of a chair; and (3) strengthening the arms makes it possible to carry packages. Regarding balance training, older adults must know that exercises that make them feel unstable ultimately help to improve balance. Once older adults understand the connection between exercise, the ability to perform daily tasks, and their desire to

maximize independence, they gain an appreciation for the life-enhancing benefits of exercise.

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About the author: Carol Levy is Co-owner of BigBand Fitness, LLC, creator of the BigBand™ Fitness System, a low-cost, user-friendly product designed specifically for older adults. The all-in-one product consists of: 1) BigBand™, a large, comfortable resistance loop with two soft rubber balls attached – the entire device is covered in soft, plush fabric, 2) a motivational 30 minute DVD with exercises performed to big band era music - each easy exercise is designed to improve upper or lower body strength, range-of-motion or balance, and 3) a large-print exercise poster. It's ideal for those with mobility challenges, arthritis, delicate skin, memory impairment, frailty or other limiting conditions. BigBand™ comes in three fabrics choices– Caribbean Turquoise, Leapin' Leopard, or Classic Blue.