

Strength Training: Great Medicine, No Side Effects

By Mitchell Yass PT

Every day you hear on the news about new findings regarding medications physicians have been prescribing to patients. The latest story is that medications used as pain relievers taken in high doses can increase your odds of heart attacks or strokes. At my physical therapy office, all I ever hear about is how some of these medications used for pain relief are destroying my patient's gastrointestinal systems. They say that the negative effects of the drugs far out weigh the benefits and decide to not take the drugs. If you watch television today, every second or third commercial is about a drug that promises to resolve some difficulty you might be having. Whether it is pain, obesity, high cholesterol, osteoporosis, depression or cardiovascular disease, these medications are supposed to correct dysfunctions of the body with a snap of a finger and the swallow of a pill. By the way, they then list a litany of side effects, some of which sound severely more serious than the problem the drug is suppose to correct.

What if there was a medication that could resolve all of these problems with a guarantee of no side effects. This medication would work on all systems of the body including the musculoskeletal systems, gastrointestinal system, cardiovascular system, pulmonary system, immune system, it could even effect the chemistry of the brain to limit depression. Would you be willing to take this drug? Well there is something that does exactly what I am saying but it doesn't come in the form of a pill. And it is not something that works over night. But it does have the ability to affect the body for years on end as long as you keep up with it. The answer is Strength Training. Most people have no idea of the value of strength training and how it affects the human body. Most people perceive strength training as an activity performed by people in their teens and twenties used for aesthetic reasons or in conjunction with athletics. At my office, I utilize strength training on patients from the age of 3 to 93. Strength training can incorporate equipment from resistance bands to free weights to weight lifting machines. Strength training can be started at any age and at any level of physical activity. My father who is in his seventies started strength training only about 4 years ago and it has altered his life completely. He no longer has lower back pain. He no longer gets calf spasms. He has more energy throughout the day. He sleeps better and feels better.

Most people believe that neck and back pain are caused by structural deficits of the skeleton or neurological system. I am here to tell you the majority of neck and lower back pain is caused by muscle imbalances, weakness or flexibility deficits causing muscles to go into spasm and creating pain. Most neck pain is not a result of a deficit of the neck rather a deficit of the shoulder and shoulder blade complex. Strength training can correct these problems resolving the cause of pain allowing for pain free fully functional lifestyles. Medications simply hide pain for short periods of time. Medication does not resolve the cause of pain; it only masks it. Lower back pain is typically a result of muscle imbalances between the front thigh and hip musculature and back thigh and hip musculature. It is not the result of herniated discs, stenosis or obesity. These are deficits that can be found by physicians but these are not the cause of pain. Lower back muscles go into spasm when they are severely shortened or lengthened. Strength training can correct these imbalances and resolve the cause of pain at the lower back. This happens everyday at my office.

Obesity in most cases is the result of a slow metabolism. Some people do have systemic reasons for their high weight. But most people have one main problem; slow metabolism. It is not really a question of how many calories you take in, although that is a factor. The real issue is how many calories you burn a day. Strength training helps increase muscle mass. More muscle means there is more of you to keep alive. The body has to work harder to produce more oxygen and energy to keep this additional tissue alive. This is how strength training can improve the function of the gastrointestinal system, cardiovascular system and pulmonary system. These systems must work harder to get oxygen and energy to the additional muscle you are creating with

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strength training. This controlled stress, causes the body to make these systems work more efficiently. The increased energy source for this additional work is fat. Fat is utilized to sustain metabolic function. Increasing your metabolism increases the use of stored fat as energy. This is how you control your weight and at the same time improve the quality of most of the systems of the body.

Strength training increases the level of HDLs(high density lipoproteins) in the blood. These are molecules combining fat and protein. These molecules have higher concentrations of protein than fat. As they pass through the circulatory system of the body, they pick off plaque from the walls of arteries and veins. This limits the chance of heart attacks and strokes.

Osteoporosis is thinning of bone matter. It is common in postmenopausal women. Strength training can correct osteoporosis. Muscles attach to bones. When a muscle contracts and pulls on the bone it is attached to, a force is created at the bone. The body recognizes this force and sends calcium to the bone to create more bone matter to increase the density of the bone. We have a woman at the office that had osteoporosis when she started here. She is seventy years old. She recently had a bone density test that stated she had the bone density of a woman 25 to 40 years old. She accomplished this simply with strength training.

Strength training causes releases of hormones in the brain called endorphins. These hormones give a person a sense of well being. Strength training also creates changes in the body that are visible. Whether it is weight loss, fitting into an outfit you have always wanted to or simply looking better, strength training can help a person's self esteem and that will certainly help correct depression. This I can tell you from personal experience. I am the confident person I am today, because I started strength training about 18 years ago and changed who I thought I was from the outside in.

So instead of thinking that some pill is going to give you a quick fix to correct some deficit you might have, realize that not all solutions are quick and easy. Sometimes, hard work, commitment and a whole lot of sweat can make the difference in your life. Stop thinking about how you can correct problems once they occur and start thinking about how you can stop these situations from occurring before they even start. I have dealt with people who had their problems when we met and others who are concerned about problems arising, as they get older. I give everybody the same advice I use, my wife uses and anybody that will listen to us; Strength train, it does the body good.

For more information regarding this article, please contact Mitchell Yass at PT-2 Physical Therapy & Personal Training- (516) 420- 2900.