

## Aging (And Exercising) Gracefully

8.2.11

**By: Burr Leonard, Founder of The Bar Method**



**Burr Leonard**

*Founder of The Bar Method*

Exercise affects people differently at different ages. I never gave much thought to how age would impact the results I got from exercise -- that is, until it did. At age 36, three Lotte Berk Method classes a week - all I could afford at that time -- were enough to give me thighs and buns like rocks. In my 40s I opened my first exercise studio, so I bumped up my attendance to four times a week. That extra weekly class made me even stronger and more toned, which led me to believe that I could hold onto my level of fitness indefinitely simply by continuing to work out at that rate.

I'd love to report that over the next 20 years, exercising that much protected my body against aging, but that is not the case. By my late 50s, I began to notice that skipping class for more than a few days in a row left me feeling weak, and that I had to struggle through a week's worth of classes after such a lapse to recover my strength. When I hit 60, my muscles started to feel like sieves, the strength draining out of them unless I attended class very regularly.

Now that I'm closing in on 63, I find that the Bar Method is still giving me great results, but I need to take class five times a week to get them.

My story is typical of regular exercisers. According to a report by Dr. Stephen Seiler, a leading sports scientist, "after about age 60, strength levels fall more rapidly" in people who strength train on a long-term basis. "The good news," he writes, are that these declines "are diminished by continued training."

What happens, then, to people who don't exercise? The study cited by Dr. Seiler found that their decline in muscle strength starts decades earlier, in their 30s, and then accelerates relative to their active peers. The way to avoid this loss, it turns out, is exercise more often as you get older.

Sedentary people not only get weaker by the way. They also get heavier. A recent study of 34,079 non-dieting middle-aged women published recently by the Institute of Medicine found that over 13 years these women gained an average of six pounds each. A subgroup of 13 percent of the women, however, did not gain weight. These were the women in the study who did moderate-to-intense exercise for about hour a day every day. Even the ones who exercised a half-an-hour each day, which doctors have recommended for years, didn't keep the extra weight from coming on.

These findings make sense when you consider a long-known fact about our bodies. Without exercise we lose on average about a half a pound of muscle mass a year. That adds up, over 20 years, to 10 fewer pounds of muscle to burn the calories consumed.

I'm happy to know that upping my number of classes per week has special benefits related to my age. That is good news -- but the really good news, according to Dr. Seller -- is that you can begin strength training at any age and make significant gains in your muscle mass. I also feel fortunate that I do the Bar Method because it continues to feel good on my body as I get older. It is so safe and gentle that it's something I can do all my life to maintain my strength.