

By Paula Shingler, BSc, MCSP

Last month I discussed problems that can arise with kids and training. This month, I decided to go to the other end of the spectrum and discuss those obstacles that we come across as we mature. The ageing body goes through lots of changes - some that we cannot do anything about but some we can reduce or prevent.

Key vulnerabilities of the older athlete

Let's look at the changes that occur in the body first:

- Heart: our maximum heart rate reduces as does our maximum cardiac output so you can push yourself too hard,
- Lungs: our lung capacity actually increases but our ability to move oxygen from the lungs into the bloodstream reduces. This results in decreased strength and endurance and reduced ability to fight infection
- Ligaments: elasticity and flexibility of ligaments reduces so we become stiffer,
- Muscle Mass: reduces, reducing strength,
- Stride length: decreases
- Bone density: decreases which makes osteoporosis a potential problem,
- Ability to store energy: reduces
- Metabolism: reduces leading to increased fat storage - this includes clogging of arteries,
- Eyesight: deteriorates,
- Joints: wear out and become prone to osteoarthritis.

Older athletes have plenty to gain

Well, that all sounds a bit gloomy but these are not reasons to stop doing sport, especially orienteering.

The benefits of remaining active as we head out of the whippersnapper classes really outweigh the potential problems:

- Heart: reduced heart disease,
- Healthy bodyweight: by increasing metabolism,
- Diabetes: reduced risk
- Blood pressure: lowered
- Mood improvements: less depression and anxiety as exercise helps to release hormones which help improve our mood,
- Mobility and co-ordination: improved exercise helps to maintain muscle mass and strength and this in turn helps with balance and co-ordination,

- Bone density: increased reducing the risk of osteoporosis - exercise stretches the tendon and ligament attachments which stimulates the bone making cells to increase their activity,
- Muscle strength: exercise maintains the strength of muscles which help to protect the joints by transmitting weight away from going directly through the joint. Less pressure is then put on the joint surfaces and less wearing occurs so this can reduce osteoarthritis.

That's all great news!

Getting the benefits without the pain

Getting the advantages of the exercise without the downsides just means considering a few adjustments. Here are a few examples of what you might think of:

- decreasing mileage - still run but cut down distance or time on your feet;
- increase number of rest days as your body will take longer to recover from activity;
- change focus and add in other activities like swimming and cycling so not the same muscles are always under pressure,
- always do a warm up and warm down - the increased tension in tendons and ligaments means that shooting off at the start desperate to get to the first control, especially in rough terrain, will guarantee that you will strain something!

Keeping active has huge benefits for your cardiovascular systems but you need to remember that you are more vulnerable to strains, sprains and fractures. If you do feel not 100% that is the day to rest. It's ideal to get yourself checked out by the doctor, or visit to the physio to sort out a niggle quickly. As we get older, our ability to heal does take longer too, so get it looked at *early*.

Orienteering is a great sport for all ages - looking after yourself properly means you can keep chasing those adventures through the bush (or looking at the scenery if you prefer!)

Paula Shingler is a Physiotherapist, running her own business 'Running Right', and is a long time member of Big Foot Orienteers, keen fell runner and mother of 2