Winter Season Shape Up for Seniors

EVERYDAY FITNESS
By Phylis Hanna

The white wonderland that is winter in the Northwest does not slow anyone in Montana down, including seniors, many of whom have spent a lifetime enjoying snow sports and playing outdoors all year round.

Physical therapists Susan Rucinski, Bill Brunett and Stacy Dolan with North Valley Hospital Physical Therapy have put together an easy-to-do shape up routine to help seniors gain and maintain the strength, balance and flexibility needed to have fun this winter.

It’s ideal to start conditioning three months prior to ski season, but starting the exercises anytime will be beneficial! All of the exercises can be done in the comfort, privacy and economy of your own home, but make sure to consult with your medical practitioner before initiating any new exercise routine. Avoid and/or modify any exercise that causes pain. Stretching is important to do every day to keep your body flexible. However, make sure to always start your exercise routine with a couple of simple stretches like the following two, which help stretch your hamstrings, quadriceps and hip flexors. Hold each stretch for at least 20 seconds and repeat at least twice.

The first time out on the slopes, or walking along snowy sidewalks, can provide a surprise for your quadriceps! Prepare them by practicing a few squats and lunges. These can be done with or without light weights. Be sure to practice lunges stepping or sliding to either side as well. Do each activity at least twice, holding the squat for 15-20 seconds and doing 10-15 lunges on each side. If you are just starting out, don’t do too much too fast. Start with just 1 set of each activity and hold it 5-10 seconds, and do 5-10 repetitions of the lunge.

Strengthening abdominal and back muscles is also important. Try this exercise to build your core strength—it is called a side plank. Hold for 20 seconds and repeat on the other side. Remember, hold it for only as long as you can. You’ll build up strength over time!
Although snow sports primarily require strong leg and core muscles, you shouldn't neglect your arm muscles! Strong arms are needed to push off and control ski poles, and help you carry extra gear. Exercise your triceps and biceps with these simple moves. Work up to completing each activity 3 times for 10-15 repetitions.

Good balance is key during the winter season to help navigate icy sidewalks, and will help you enjoy skiing and other outdoor activities even more. Improving balance is easier than you think! Simple exercises, such as balancing on one foot, can be done incidentally during the course of your day. You can also practice the ancient routine beloved by law enforcement of standing or walking with one foot in front of the other—it's called a Tandem Stance. It will improve your balance! Work up to holding each position for 20 seconds. Feel free to hold onto a chair if you need help balancing when you first start out.

The exercises pictured are just a beginning to improving your fitness for the winter season – and beyond!

To find out more about North Valley Hospital Physical Therapy, please call 892-2777 or visit their website at www.NVPhysicalTherapy.org. MW