

Fewer elderly would fall if they exercised more often

ANDREW READ

Older people worry more about falling than they do about crime or financial difficulties, according to Dr Dawn Skelton from Manchester University. But you can "exercise your demons", she argued.

A third of the over-65s will fall this year – and half of the over-80s. Even quite modest levels of exercise could halve this, said Dr Skelton. Appropriate exercise can also help maintain an independent and higher quality of life for longer, she said.

Falls can be traumatic. Half of older people who fracture their hip will die or become dependent on others within a year, Dr Skelton told delegates yesterday at the Festival of Science in Salford.

"Four out of five over-80s would rather be dead than suffer the loss of independence that a hip fracture and subsequent nursing home admittance may bring," she said.

Falls by older people are very costly for the public health services. Over 10 per cent of falls result in fractures, and a single hip fracture can cost up to €25,000, she said. In the UK, fractures cost the NHS £1.2 billion per year.

Exercise can make falls less likely, less damaging and easier to recover from. It can also reduce disease problems, she said. The belief that the need for exercise decreases with age is a myth, she said. "For many aspects of exercise performance, elderly people are just as

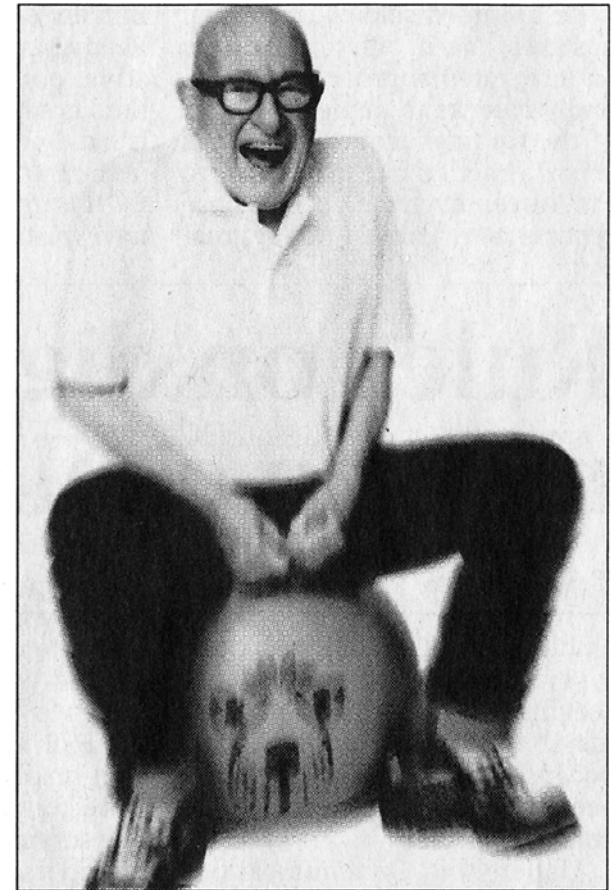
responsive to exercise training as younger adults. However, they have special needs when it comes to considering the choice of exercise. It is never too late to start."

A one-hour tailored exercise class a week and half an hour of moderate activity a day is enough to maintain independence, she said. "Most women in the UK have nine years of daily help. This is not necessary." Moderate activity is anything that raises breathing and heart rate a bit. Sex, gardening, walking, lawn bowls and dancing are ideal, she said.

Walking and swimming don't improve balance. Instead, specific balance exercises can reduce risk of falling, she said. Slowly stand up on your toes and then sink back down and slowly rise up on your heels. Try standing on one leg. For both exercises, it is important to hold on to something solid such as the sink to begin with, she said.

In her experimental trials, Dr Skelton's exercise regime led to a 40 per cent improvement in muscle strength and a 30 per cent improvement in balance after six months, she said. After a year, bone strength and aerobic capacity were increased.

"Not using muscles can have more effect than any disease. If they are not active, the body absorbs muscles and uses the energy elsewhere. Use them or lose them," she said. Leg muscle mass halves between the ages of 30 and 80, she added. However, with regular exercise, a 70-year-old can have the muscle mass of a sedentary 30-year-old.



It is never too late to reap the health benefits of regular exercise

Residential homes could encourage more exercise, but staff are often worried about increasing risk. "It is a sad fact that it is often the carers or relatives that instil this myth of 'take it easy, slow down' into the person, and this limitation leads to a spiral of disuse and self-imposed disability." About half of older people in the UK get less than a half an hour of moderate exercise a week, she said.