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Working out works well for seniors

By Ashley Ames • DEMOCRAT WRITER • March 7, 2010

Sal D'Amico is not afraid of a little heavy-lifting.

Seventy-nine years old in June, he's been working out consistently for the last 30 years. Age isn't something he's going to let bring him down.

"Whatever you put your mind to, you can do," he said.

Retirement is something people look forward to most of their life, a well-deserved break after years of hard work.

But many seniors wind up slowing down more than is healthy, at a time when regular activity could be the key to long-lasting good health, according to experts.

"(Physical activity) helps give you more reserves to fight against illnesses that could knock your brain down," said Dr. Alice Pomidor, a geriatrician at Florida State University's medical school. "It can improve your ability to tolerate other kinds of illnesses."

One of the key factors of a dementia such as Alzheimer's disease is the brain's lack of reserves, which can lead it to go into what Pomidor called "brain failure." Essentially, "brain reserves" represent the resilience to neurological damage of the brain. As people get older, they begin to have less and less resilience.

"What physical activity does for you is continue to build reserves in multiple ways," Pomidor said.

D'Amico goes to his local YMCA — the Northwest branch — almost every day. Since he got into running at age 48, he's made physical fitness a priority, combatting a sore back with massages and abdominal strengthening.

"The minute I stop, I start getting atrophy," D'Amico said. "I'm so used to working out."

Travis McGilvary, membership coordinator at the Northwest YMCA who has a grandmother with age-related issues, said he is inspired by seniors who come to work out every day.

"We have seniors in their 90s, 80s, 70s — all in incredible shape," he said.

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