

# Solving the Muscle Loss Mystery

## Understanding Sarcopenia

**H**ave you ever wondered why older folks have a difficult time getting up from a chair, getting out of the bath tub or walking a good distance? What is going on?



Aging is unavoidable.

As we age our bodies go through a lot of changes. One of the greatest challenges that we have as we age is maintaining our health and mobility. We often lose the ability to do everyday activities that we once took for granted.

Most likely, you have heard of the loss of bone mass known as osteoporosis. This loss of bone mass happens as one ages. Osteoporosis is commonly talked about with aging populations. However, sarcopenia, muscle mass loss, can actually be even more common and is often unnoticed by older adults. Often the two conditions are found at the same time or right after one another.

The age related loss of muscle begins as early as 40 years of age. After the age of 75, there is even more rapid muscle loss. Sarcopenia often makes the most basic everyday task difficult. The condition can also increase the risk of falls or other injuries that can be overwhelming to an individual and their independence. Most directly, sarcopenia can affect activities of daily living.

## Activities of Daily Living



Activities of daily living include the day to day tasks necessary for staying independent. The activities most affected by sarcopenia are:

- Walking and climbing stairs – This includes being able to walk around the house, the store or other places as needed.
- Standing up from a sitting position.
- Getting in and out of bed.
- Bathing – This activity includes getting in and out of the shower or bathtub and being able to clean your body fully.
- Housework – This includes tasks such as doing the dishes, washing and folding laundry and basic house cleaning.
- Shopping – This includes being able to go to the store, bring purchases back home and put them away.
- Dressing – This activity includes being able to get clothes from closets and drawers and being able to put on clothing with fasteners such as buttons, snaps and zippers.
- Grooming – This includes being able to brush hair, shave hair as appropriate and brush teeth daily.
- Driving – This includes being able to reach around to put on seatbelt, being able to turn to see traffic and following all road signs.
- Cooking – This includes being able to get out cookware, cooking and eating.

Sarcopenia, unfortunately, is part of the aging process. Below are the known causes and ways you might slow down muscle loss.

## Physical Activity

Physical activity is critical for the prevention of and/or management of sarcopenia. When you do cardiovascular work such as walking, jogging or swimming, you are working the muscles that you already have. The use of strength training activities is best to prevent and manage sarcopenia. If you have already had a regular cardiovascular workout, such as walking daily, you may want to add some muscle

strengthening activities to your routine. You can use weights, bands, machines or other weight resistant materials to build your strength and keep your joints moving. The mobility of joints allows you to maintain many of the daily activities. If you have not been physically active recently, talk to your healthcare provider about what activities would be best for you.

## **Hormone Levels**

As a person ages many hormone levels decrease. One example is the growth hormone that circulates in our bodies. An older adult has approximately one third of the circulating growth hormone as a teenager. Testosterone is also a hormone that has essential functions for both men and women which



declines as an individual ages. Researchers are also examining other hormones and their connection to muscle maintenance as a person ages. Talk to your healthcare provider about hormone levels and how they impact your health.

## **Dietary Impact**

Dietary issues that influence the development of sarcopenia include not having enough protein in the diet and not having enough calories as a whole in the diet. It is fairly common that older adults do not get enough protein in their diet. Making sure that you are eating high quality proteins, such as lean or low-fat meats, fish, chicken, eggs, and soy daily is important.

Muscle loss as a person ages can be a serious issue. Sarcopenia can be a reason that an individual will not be able to stay as independent as he or she may wish. Thankfully, there are ways that an individual can slow and/ or manage muscle mass

loss. By staying active, talking with your doctor and eating a sensible diet with high protein, you can help prevent muscle loss.

**References:**

**PBS.org. (2008). Home Care. *Caring for Your Parents*.**

**<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/caringforyourparents/handbook/homecare/whenis.html>**

**Vella, C.A., & Kravitz, L. (2002). Sarcopenia: The mystery of muscle loss. *IDEA Personal Trainer*,13(4), 30-35.**

**Nicole Peritore, M.S.**

**Extension Specialist for Family Health**

**Janet Kurzynske, Ph.D.**

**Extension Specialist for Food and Nutrition**

**August 2016**

Copyright © 2016 for materials developed by University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension. This publication may be reproduced in portions or its entirety for educational or nonprofit purposes only. Permitted users shall give credit to the author(s) and include this copyright notice.

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, or physical or mental disability.

