

What does quality of life really mean?

Why 'healthspan' and 'strengthspan' are important concepts

Last summer I travelled to my homeland Finland where I enjoyed the nightless night and midnight sun – and was reminded of the investment the country makes in fitness and exercise for all ages.

Finland has made a commitment to supporting the health of its citizens with many open and accessible spaces fitted with exercise equipment.

When the sun doesn't set, these spaces allow people to engage in exercise outdoors even throughout the night.

Strength training in a forest by a lake close to midnight is not an experience that many can have, and it was definitely a memorable moment for me when I joined a friend at an outdoor exercise park.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has defined health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" and wellness as "the optimal state of health of individuals and groups".

These definitions reflect the activities and choices we make, and the degree to which we control health-related risk factors and include beneficial factors in our lives, such as nutrition, exercise and positive social interactions.

These concepts are closely linked and it could be said that good health is our goal while wellness is the by-product of a healthy lifestyle, allowing us to live the life we choose.

When talking about healthy ageing, we often focus on longevity and quality of life, otherwise known as 'lifespan' and 'healthspan' respectively in the literature.

While lifespan simply means the time we are alive, healthspan is a more encompassing concept which has been defined by Matt Kaeberlein (*GeroScience*, 2018) as "the period

of life spent in good health, free from the chronic diseases and disabilities of ageing".

A recent editorial in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* (July 2024) added a new term, 'strengthspan', describing the impact of physical strength on overall health across all stages of life.

The new definition refers to the impact of exercise and strength at every age, from childhood to the older years, and is consistent with today's focus on healthy ageing – it's not just about living longer, rather we aim to live better with improved quality of life.

As said by the authors of the *BJSM* editorial, "Strengthspan-centred actions will add life to years and not just years to life."

Exercise and generally keeping active is essential at every age, which needs to be addressed if people are to age with health and wellness.

Already in 2012, *The Lancet* flagged physical inactivity as a major non-communicable disease worldwide. In the original article by Lee et al., it was estimated that physical inactivity causes six per cent of the burden of disease from coronary heart disease, seven per cent of type 2 diabetes, 10 per cent of breast cancer, and 10 per cent of colon cancer. Inactivity was also the reason for nine per cent of cases of premature mortality.

As we get older the rate of ageing increases, and more emphasis needs to be placed on appropriate, progressive strength and balance training, to keep up good health, strength and mobility, maintain and increase muscle and bone mass, and prevent chronic diseases.

A constant and growing volume of research provides evidence for the best modalities for exercise, with the results summarised in many literature reviews.

Based on these findings, the World Health Organisation and Australian Government have recommended



Tuire using exercise equipment in Lehtisaari, Säynätsalo, Finland around midnight during Finland's summer this year.

people over 65 include at least 150 to 300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity per week.

In addition, they recommend strength training two days per week and varied multicomponent physical activity emphasising functional balance and strength training three days a week.

Sadly these guidelines are not being met by the general population, leading to an increase of chronic diseases, frailty and falls.

In 2022 the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare reported 57 per cent of adults aged 65 and over did not meet the physical activity guidelines and 84 per cent did not do enough muscle-strengthening activities.

We must keep on advocating for exercise for all ages, from the fittest to the frailest, to give everyone the chance for their best health.

Aged care providers have an important role to play in the programs they offer and the facilities they install.

Exercise should be easily accessible to all – whether in a public park in Finland or an aged care home in Australia.

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