I am 55 years old and have never had a regular exercise program. What are the benefits of exercise, and will I benefit starting at this later stage of my life?

Exercise has been shown to be beneficial at all ages. It is important to seek advice from your health-care provider (physician) regarding the kind of exercise suited to your present health condition. You will need direction as to what is the best exercise for you and how much you should do as you start out on such a program.

Regular exercise helps keep us energized, and is also important in helping to prevent and aid in the treatment of certain diseases. Exercise can help to lower hypertension (high blood pressure). This is especially true of aerobic exercise (such as walking, running, jogging, and swimming). Individuals who have moderate hypertension may additionally need medications in order to achieve the best blood pressure control.

Regular exercise helps to strengthen bones. Exercise can help to increase the healthy or high density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL). Individuals who exercise regularly have less chance of developing type 2 diabetes in adult life. In those patients who already have this disease, exercise can help control or even reverse the diabetes, as long as the lifestyle changes are continued. Any changes in medications should be made by the treating physician.

Regular exercise appears to decrease the risk for certain cancers. The evidence is most convincing for breast and colon cancer; it is thought that exercise may also decrease the occurrence of prostate, lung, and uterine (womb) cancers. This benefit of exercise may be partly because physical activity helps to reduce weight, and excess weight is a risk for cancer.

Regular exercise is good for you only if you do it! It is never too late to start.
that may encourage me to continue exercising?

Regular exercise not only energizes the body, but also gives one a feeling of well-being. This is associated with a generally better quality of life both physically and mentally.

Exercise helps to reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. Some of these effects are due to certain chemicals produced by the body (with exercise) called endorphins. These substances help to elevate the mood.

Exercise improves mental function. Exercise may delay the onset of Alzheimer’s disease in individuals who may be prone to this disease, and also decrease the worsening symptoms of Alzheimer’s. Measurable improvements in memory have been demonstrated after 9 to 10 weeks of regular aerobic exercise.

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While this column is provided as a service to our readers, Drs. Landless and Handysides unfortunately cannot enter into personal and private communication with our readers. We recommend that you consult with your personal physician on all matters of your health.