What's the Best Exercise for People With HIV Over 50?

With the help of a $3.9 million grant from the National Institute on Aging, two researchers aim to find out.

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The holiday season may be the perfect—or the worst!—time to broach the topic of exercise. We all know physical movement is good for us, but which workouts are best for people aging with HIV?

Two researchers received a $3.9 million grant over five years from the National Institute on Aging to explore that very topic. Specifically, they'll compare two types of workouts for people living with HIV who are 50 and older—high-intensity interval training (HIIT) and continuous moderate intensity exercise (CME)—and see how each reduces fatigue and affects skeletal muscle and the production of cellular energy.

"As we celebrate how far we've come in surviving with HIV, now we're doing more about figuring out how to [help] this growing population live and age well," said Allison Webel, PhD, RN, FAAN, an associate professor of nursing at Case Western Reserve University's Francis Payne Bolton School of Nursing. "We're focused on increasing not only the maximum lifespan but their maximum healthspan."

Webel, whose research lab focuses on nonpharmacological ways to live and age well with HIV, is a co–primary investigator in the research. Joining her is Kristine Erlandson, MD, an associate professor of medicine at the University of Colorado—Denver School of Medicine who specializes in infectious diseases.

"Our findings in previous research suggest that an innovative approach to exercise is needed to improve physical function, reduce fatigue and to maintain a long-term exercise habit among older people with HIV," Webel said in a press release about the grant. "This is especially important because some of these people heard the wrong message in the early days. We know that today it is completely safe and healthy for people with HIV to exercise, even though the message early in the AIDS epidemic/pandemic was that they should not over-exert."

It's important to understand the best exercise regimens for people aging with HIV. Nearly 1.2 million people have HIV in the United States, and about 50% are 50 or older. It's estimated that within a decade, that number will jump to 70%.

Webel and Erlandson’s research will also explore whether a digital program called mHealthCoach can make it easier for folks to stick with the exercise routines.

In related news, each September 18, marks National HIV/AIDS and Aging Awareness Day (NHAAD).

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