



Balance for Off-Peak Programming

by Christine Romani-Ruby

According to the International Health Racquet and Sportsclub of America (IHRSA), people over the age of 55 now represent nearly one quarter of all health club members. The baby boomers are reaching their 50s and are leading the way, by demanding a more active lifestyle. They are looking to slow the aging process and have found that staying fit is at the top of their list. These new members have changed the demographics for health clubs over the last 15 years.

Centers are finding that this new group of members can easily co-exist with more traditional members by filling the slower daytime hours when most members are at work. By offering the appropriate programming during off-peak times, centers are not only retaining these members, but they are attracting new ones. These nontraditional members do come with a new list of wants and needs due to their age and interests. Most of them are baby boomers born between the years of 1946 and 1964, and they are eager to continue an active lifestyle well into their 70s and 80s. Their fitness goals revolve more around daily life and total wellness than their looks or a competitive athletic event. Their bodies require softer programming that can still help them to meet the goals of increasing balance, flexibility and strength.

One necessary component of exercise programs for these nontraditional members is fairly new to the fitness center. This component is balance. Balance declines naturally and becomes an important part of fitness as we age. The centers for disease control (CDC) reports that 33% of Americans age 65 years or older have at least one serious fall each year. The most common ailment with these falls is a hip fracture with 80,000 incidents occurring from 1988 to 1996. Sixty percent of these falls occur at home during normal activities of daily living. A fall for an elderly individual can be a serious event because healing occurs

more slowly as we age. For many, a fall and a hip fracture can lead to a downward turn of events that can prevent the person from returning to independent living.

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What is most interesting is that these falls can be prevented. Strengthening and balance programs are one of the most important parts of a prevention program. The CDC reports that an effective fall prevention program can reduce the incidence of falls by 30 to 50%. They recommend that an effective program include: balance and coordination activities; strengthening through weight-bearing exercise (to build strong bones); cardiovascular conditioning, and education on safety strategies for the home and for the use of medications.

Wellness centers, such as Wilfred R. Cameron Wellness Center in Washington, PA, are finding Pilates programming to be a perfect fit for this new demographic. They offer mat programs, but find that the reformer and tower programs are the most attractive to seniors. The Pilates equipment is more accessible than the mat because it is raised from the floor and it assists with many of the activities involving strength and flexibility. Older adults in general have difficulty getting up and down to the floor level and it is much more comfortable for them if you can provide a raised mat or a piece of equipment on which they can exercise. The Center in the Woods at California University of PA has had success in filling its Pilates programs by adding

the theme of fall prevention to its Pilates classes.

Here are some tips for the successful planning of your Pilates fall prevention program:

1. Design the program as a six-week class that meets twice weekly. This allows enough time for successful strengthening to take place and for you to include a significant amount of client education.
2. At each class, offer ten minutes of safety instruction with written materials followed by a Pilates exercise class.
3. Keep the classes small to allow personal attention. Depending on the equipment available for the class, plan on six to twelve participants per instructor.
4. Use Pilates equipment rather than just a mat class. Inexpensive pieces of equipment to consider would be the low barrel (sometimes called the spine corrector), a raised mat, the Airex minibeam and a Pilates ring. Remember that with such a small group, you could even use several different pieces of equipment and perform a circuit type of workout. This way it would not be necessary to have several pieces of one type of equipment allowing the use of an existing studio set.
5. Be sure that your class description includes information on the benefits that Pilates can provide for balance and core strength that have been shown to significantly reduce the incidence of falls. Fear of falling is a common problem for seniors and they are actively looking for programs that will help decrease their chances of a fall.

Visit the www.phipilates.com to purchase the new “BeBalanced!” DVD, an excellent tool for fall prevention. **CS**

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