

# an exercise in staying upright

A fortnightly series for seniors by Ruth Gerzon from Eastern Bay Villages.



## grey matters by Ruth Gerzon

Sometimes issues seem really complex, with many facets and time-consuming solutions.

I often long for things just to be simpler. So when local physiotherapist Sam Doogue told me how we can easily maintain muscle strength as we age, so that we can maintain independence and stay upright, I was entranced by his solution. It could not be more simple.

But first, a bit about the man. Sam came with his family to live in the Eastern Bay 17 years ago after work in exotic locations such as the Middle East, United States, Darwin and Taranaki.

He currently works as a vocational therapist, rehabilitating people after accidents, but his real passion is working with older people. He knows his stuff and can reel off those statistics that we now hear so often, warning us how many more people will be over 85 by 2050 (six times as many as now).

He has studied the physical needs of older people and is a scientist at heart, so I am confident this information is based on real, not fake, news.

He says leg strength is the single strongest predictor of independence amongst older people but that we naturally lose muscle strength and mass as we age. Between the ages of 40 and 85, 80 percent of our strength is lost.

However, what is lost can be found. Studies show that we can not only prevent a loss of muscle strength but even turn it around. People in their 90s can regain lost strength.

We note this loss occurring when we move down a notch in our independence. We may find we need a chair with arms so we can lever ourselves out of it, or going out into the community becomes a chore as we might fear falling or tire quickly.

Sam's epiphany came when he was working with an older man in Whakatane in 2002. The

man's wife had to get her shoulder under his arm to help him get out of his chair and they made their way unsteadily and slowly to the bathroom in a way that could mean disaster for them both.

Sam provided the usual physiotherapy advice, giving him a list of exercises to do. On his return a couple of weeks later, the list was lost and there was no improvement. Disappointed, Sam was abrupt due to fear for the safety of the man's wife. He told him to do just one thing, "sit to stand from his chair 200 times a day".

A mere fortnight later, the man was using his walking frame to go to the bathroom on his own, while his wife watched on. Two weeks after that he could do this without a walking frame. The next time Sam visited he was weeding his garden for the first time in five years.

I was blown away by this story, as I never realised the loss of muscle strength could be so easily reversed. But, ever hopeful, I asked Sam if my more enjoyable leisure activities of walking or cycling would suffice. Would that kind of exercise mean I could reward myself with a relaxing time of sitting for hours in the evening? Apparently not. Cycling, jogging and walking (unless going up steep hills) is shown not to improve strength sufficiently to prevent loss of independence and balance. Walking around the block simply does not maintain the strength of our legs sufficiently.

Sam later used his scientific instinct to research leg strength and developed a device to help people count the number of times they get up. He knows that the man's increasing strength was not just an isolated miracle but is something available to us all.

The need to maintain muscle strength is also a reason Sam is against raised chairs.

Once you can only sit or stand safely from a raised chair you are no longer able to easily visit friends or walk around in the community. He believes it is far better, and eminently possible, to simply strengthen our leg muscles so those aids become unnecessary.

People usually enter rest homes for one of three reasons: loss of leg strength, incontinence or dementia. Sam has observed that using the simple sitting to standing routine has two important side benefits: it can improve balance and can even reverse incontinence.

When we move from sitting to standing it takes us a moment to reorient our body to the new position, and that can be a time of falls. Our ability to stand easily improves as we do it more often. He has also seen incontinence improve markedly as the move to a standing position



Eastern Bay Villages

contracts the pelvic floor. He is careful to note that this side effect of simply repeated sitting to standing has been reported often but not yet scientifically researched. Yet sitting to standing as an exercise needs no equipment nor a physiotherapist, it may be also the most effective way to prevent us from falling and keep us out of rest homes.

I pointed out that he might be working himself out of a job, but Sam is genuinely not worried at this possibility. He just wants more people to know how to improve their lives.

I have always loved Douglas Adams' book, A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. As readers will know, it posits that the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe and everything, is 42. A simple solution to those big questions. Now we have a simple solution to staying out of a rest home for longer. Thanks Sam, I'm glad I know you.

**SIMPLE SOLUTION:** Physiotherapist Sam Doogue says standing and sitting exercises are great for strengthening legs. Photo supplied

WHAKATANE  
COMBINED CHURCHES  
PRESENT...

# LIGHT PARTY

... A POSITIVE ALTERNATIVE  
TO HALLOWEEN

ENTRY: GOLD COIN DONATION  
FREE FOOD FOR CHILDREN

GALA GAMES

SPOT PRIZES,  
DANCE CREWS,  
TRADING CARDS,  
FUN!

**WEDNESDAY,  
OCT 31, 2018**

Whakatane War  
Memorial Hall  
FROM 5.30PM to 7.45pm

DRESS AS A  
JUNGLE  
ANIMAL

PROUDLY SUPPORTED BY:

BEACON  
ENLIGHTENING THE EASTERN BAY SINCE 1939

EASTBAY R.E.A.P.

WHAKATANE  
District Council  
Kia Whakatāne me i ahau