

## **Aetna's Wellness Podcast Series – Why Muscles Matter**

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### **Samantha Lyall**

Hi everyone and thank you for listening to our podcast series focused on wellness. This is a series where we'll talk about current health and wellbeing topics to help you, no matter where you are in your own health journey. My name is Samantha Lyall and here with me today is Nick Etheridge, who's a health coach here at Aetna. Nick's been coaching with us for eight years, thanks for joining us, Nick.

### **Nick Etheridge**

Thank you, Samantha, for having me. Glad to be here.

### **Samantha Lyall**

Nick is here with me today to talk about musculoskeletal health. The musculoskeletal system is a system of muscles, bones, and joints and associated tissues, that help our bodies move and also help us maintain our structure and form. To begin, Nick, can you explain why healthy muscles matter?

### **Nick Etheridge**

That is a great question. And I love the way you asked that question, because that's a question I feel like, we as health professionals and fitness professionals, should probably ask ourselves more. Because, healthy muscles, stronger muscles, independent of other health factors, have a significant impact, enormous impact on our overall health. People with stronger muscles, live longer. They have less pain, less incidence of heart attacks, strokes, a much lower risk for osteoporosis, diabetes, typically with stronger muscles, people weigh less, have less body fat.

The prevalence of stress, anxiety, depression is lower. And people with more muscular strength, recover quicker from surgeries. There's less a hospital admittance, cancer survivorship is higher among individuals who have stronger muscles. And for those people that may not have any ambition of being a bodybuilder or even for those people that are strong muscles, independent of other health factors really play a huge role in our overall health.

### **Samantha Lyall**

You unpacked a lot there, Nick. You talked about the importance of muscles as well as the benefits of really working on your muscles and how that can lead to a longer lifespan. And, I really like the point about how you don't have to be a bodybuilder to be focusing on muscle strength. So, can you talk with us a little bit about how you get healthier muscles?

### **Nick Etheridge**

Absolutely. For healthier muscles, or stronger muscles, they need to be used repetitively. And so, it's a kind of a three-step process and I'll explain it a little more, but we load the muscle for a series of repetitions. We do a rest period and then we repeat. So, what we're looking for is repeated load, over time in a consistent manner to improve strength. When we talk about adding load, anything that adds a resistance, for example, bending your arms at the elbow, if you were to do that with a pencil, you could do it probably all day. But if you add a dumbbell, or anything that has resistance, that recruits more muscles, more muscle fibers, essentially waking up muscle fibers that aren't being used on a regular basis. And that's where the adaptations and the gains in strength happen. And so, there's a number of ways to do that but finding something that you can do consistently and repetitively.

### **Samantha Lyall**

It sounds like you're really talking about a three-step process of stress, recovery, and repeat. Are there certain things you should be doing to increase muscle fitness, such as a resistance training program? And if so, what does that look like?

### **Nick Etheridge**

Sure. It can take a lot of different forms. It does not have to be in a gym, lifting weights. Traditionally, strength training would include exercises like pushups, leg lifts, and another common type of gym-type exercises. But other ways you can use a rubber tubing, stretchable bands, the free weights, dumbbells, barbells, machine weights and anything that involves a using your muscles against the weight of your own body, so callisthenic-type exercise, can increase your muscular fitness so it can be achieved in a number of different ways.

The recommendation right now is to choose a load or weight, by which you can do 12 to 15 reps, for most individuals, to start. And by that 15th rep, you would start to feel like you were kind of getting to that sticking point you would repeat that process, the recommendation is two to four sets, per session, with the rest of two to three minutes in between. And so, it's all about lifting weight against load repetitively, and allowing a little time in between for the muscles to recover.

### **Samantha Lyall**

I love the fact that you brought up, you don't have to be in the gym. You don't need to have traditional weights. You can even use things such as your own body weight, right, to be including different exercises into your routine to help build muscle strength.

### **Nick Etheridge**

Absolutely. Yup. As long as you're doing it consistently. Absolutely.

### **Samantha Lyall**

Right. And so, I'm curious, especially as we speak about musculoskeletal health, how can you strengthen your core?

### **Nick Etheridge**

That is a great question. That is something that I get as a coach more, more questions on recently than I have in the past. When you're talking about core strength, you're talking about the muscles that are connected to the spine and the hip and the rib cage, that essentially stabilize the abdomen. If you think about it, we typically don't flex that area, against the load. Very often. It's more about stabilization. Strong muscles around the core stabilize the spine. They work against gravity. As the muscles in the core weaken, the spine tends to compress, that's where you get changes in posture and run the risk of developing back pain, which about 50% of us at some point in our life will deal with. So, by strengthening those core muscles, it really is impacting your long-term health quite significantly. Working the core traditionally would be done on a mat, doing things like crunches or sit-ups, but it can also be done in a number of other different ways. Anything that involves balance, posture, yoga, Pilates, there's lots of different ways that you can work your core, tends to really be an important thing to do.

### **Samantha Lyall**

You've covered a lot about the different types of exercises that you can be doing to strengthen your muscles. How often should you do those exercises?

### **Nick Etheridge**

The good news is, it does not have to be done as often as you might think for it to be effective. The guideline we go off of is American College of Sports Medicine. The guideline for how often to exercise, right now. As little as two days a week, one to two sets, even. When I say sets, that will be the number of repetitions you could do a before you fatigue. And then you would take a rest and then you repeat that. So, the guideline is currently two days a week, but there have been, even studies that have shown one day a week can increase muscular strength. If you can allow 24 to 48 hours in between to allow your muscles to recover, enough so that you're a little bit sore between sessions, and then, allowing yourself to recover.

### **Samantha Lyall**

And with a routine like this, how can you get started?

### **Nick Etheridge**

It's always a good idea to talk to your doctor before starting a resistance, a lifting program, particularly, if you have been diagnosed with high blood pressure, or have any, joint issues,

but also like to emphasize the strength training is a very safe practice. It's not a high-risk activity. It can be done by anybody of any age. But the form tends to be key. So, starting with a professional could be a good way to get started, just because with strength training, often your body is going to be in positions that you're not normally in. So, it can put a lot of strain on the lower back, for instance. A lot of strain in areas around the joints. And so, the proper form, is important. If you went with a partner, have them kind of a watch how your back is doing on the exercise, just by following along. Correct form. You could work with a fitness professional, or certainly, nowadays, things like, there's a lot of good apps, there's a lot of good videos you can do, and keeping it simple at first, something that you can do in proper form that feels comfortable for you would be, probably the best way to get started.

### **Samantha Lyall**

I think the big things I heard there was really looking for guidance from partners or other resources, the fact that form matters, and starting simple. Anything else you'd like to add, Nick?

### **Nick Etheridge**

You know, I think the biggest thing is getting started with something, that you enjoy. Maybe enjoy is a strong word, but for strength training to be effective, it just needs to be repetitive and consistent. So, starting with exercises you're comfortable with, that you feel proficient at, and you can get more, exotic. More of a variety as you go but choosing something you enjoy and keeping it simple to start and picking something that you can work into your week on a regular basis, is probably the biggest thing.

The other thing to watch out for with strength training is your breathing, because as you lift weights against a load, there's a tendency for most of us to kind of hold our breath and bear down. So, you want to keep your normal breathing throughout the range of motion. When you hold your breath and bear down, that's when your blood pressure increases more significantly. Allow for proper breathing, getting the basic form down. Those are the biggest things to focus on when you're getting started.

### **Samantha Lyall**

I think that's really important. When people hear about different exercises, sometimes they tend to get excited and want to jump all in. So, I think it's really important to emphasize starting slow and finding things that you really enjoy and can fit in every day.

### **Nick Etheridge**

Absolutely. Whatever it is you're going to do the most of over time. Absolutely. So, that I think is really important when you're starting out.

### **Samantha Lyall**

Well, thank you so much for joining us, Nick, and sharing information about why muscles matter and thank you to our listeners. Until next time, stay well.

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