

Fit as a **FIDDLE!** One woman revels in what regular workouts have done for her

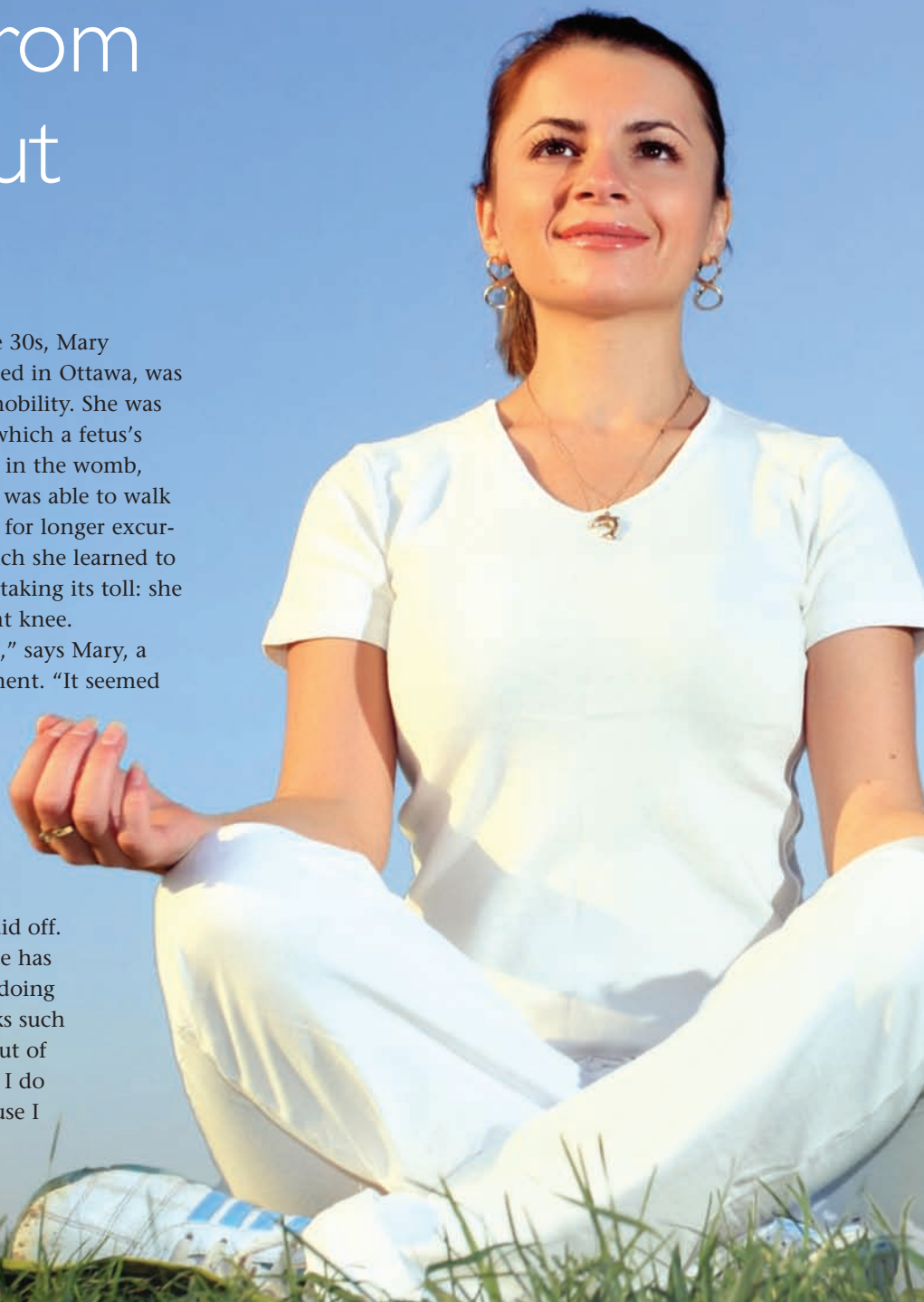
Don't let a disability stop you from working out

LISA BENDALL

When she reached her late 30s, Mary Dufton, now 42 and based in Ottawa, was having problems with mobility. She was born with spina bifida, a condition in which a fetus's spinal column fails to develop properly in the womb, resulting in some lower paralysis. Mary was able to walk short distances and used a scooter only for longer excursions. But after decades of walking, which she learned to do at the age of two, her disability was taking its toll: she had developed osteoarthritis in her right knee.

"My mobility was starting to decline," says Mary, a project officer with the federal government. "It seemed harder to walk and get around. I had some falls, and those were really worrying me."

That's when she took action. Mary signed up at a gym for a twice-a-week regimen of weight training, cardio exercises and moves to improve her balance and overall core stability. It's paid off. Since she started exercising regularly, she has more stamina and less pain. "It's made doing my daily activities easier," she says. Tasks such as carrying groceries or getting in and out of the tub are less of an effort. "And when I do fall, I don't injure myself as much because I have the strength to break the fall."



One in seven Canadians is, like Mary, living with some form of disability. Most report difficulties with pain, mobility or agility. And while all these may seem like reasons to avoid exercise, in fact they are reasons to embrace it.

“People with restricted mobility are at a greater risk of heart disease because they’re sedentary,” says Rudy Niebuhr, a Winnipeg physiotherapist who works with clients who have disabilities from spinal cord injuries. Not only will exercise reduce cardiovascular and other health complications, it will also help you maximize your abilities — and lift your mood.

“You benefit not just physically but mentally as well,”

says Kristy Hoornick, a fitness professional based in London, Ont. “You develop more self-confidence and self-awareness.”

Mary is a case in point. “After a workout, I feel energized,” she says. “Just because you have a disability doesn’t mean you can’t do an exercise program. There may be things you can’t do, but there is quite a lot you *can* do — and you’ll feel a lot better for it.”

But you don’t have to join a gym; you can reap benefits by working on your own. Even without a gym membership, there are simple exercises you can do at home to get into top shape. And many can be done no matter what your level of ability. Read on for some examples.

1 Leg lift

Stand behind a sturdy chair with your hands placed firmly on its back. Slowly lift up one leg behind you, as high as you can while keeping your other knee and your back straight. Hold the leg there for 30 to 60 seconds. Keep your knee aligned with your hip. Alternate legs. If this is too easy, try holding the chair with just one hand or use no hands. Then try closing your eyes. “This will enhance your balance,” says Hoornick.

2 Wall slide

Lean against a wall with your shoulders touching the wall, your arms at your sides and your knees slightly bent. Slowly slide your hands along the wall away from your body and up as high as you can as you breathe for two counts. Then slide your hands back down to shoulder height for another count of two. Your fingers, arms and shoulder blades should maintain continuous contact with the wall. For an added challenge, add wrist weights or do this move in a squatting position. This exercise is excellent for promoting good posture.

3 Leg extensions

While sitting in a chair or wheelchair, bend and draw up one leg, then straighten it out. Try to sit tall and avoid bending at the waist. Hold for two counts, then repeat. Alternate with the other leg. Add a stretch: place the heel of the extended leg on a sturdy stool, then push down with your leg muscles, making sure the foot is flexed upward.

RESOURCES

Active Living Alliance
for Canadians with a
Disability
www.ala.ca

Wheelchair Fitness Manual
(Hutton House)
Call 519 472 6381 to order.

Exercises for Multiple Sclerosis
Brad Hamler (Hatherleigh Press)

Arthritis: What Exercises Work
Dava Sobel and Arthur C. Klein (Griffin)

Armchair Pilates DVD Series
<http://store.stottpilates.com>

Click on At Home DVDs, then select Active
Aging Series.

4 Sits and squats

Stand in front of a chair and alternate sitting and standing up while keeping your back straight. Do not grab onto anything for support. Repeat 10 times. “This is an important functional exercise,” says Niebuhr. “To lose the ability to get in and out of a chair would have huge implications.” For more of a challenge, hover over the chair for 30 seconds without sitting down. You can also try this move holding hand weights or balancing on one leg. “This works the legs and the stomach muscles and improves balance,” says Hoornick.

5 Wall push-ups

Stand about three feet (90 cm) from the wall and place the palms of your hands on the wall at shoulder level and shoulder width apart. Bend your elbows and lean toward the wall, while keeping the rest of your body straight. Try not to push your hips toward the wall. Push yourself away and back again for a wall push-up. Take it up a notch by placing your hands a little closer together or starting with your feet farther away from the wall. Wall push-ups can be done from a sitting position as well.

6 Walking and wheeling

It may be challenging to do aerobic activities at home, so for a balanced workout, incorporate walking — or wheeling — into your weekly routine. On cold rainy days, use the hallways of your condo or the walkways of a local mall. “Take advantage of whatever surroundings you have to get walking for that cardiovascular health,” says Niebuhr. Even if you walk slowly, you’ll notice improvements to circulation, strength and range of motion.

Thinking Outside the Gym

Can't fit a home gym in your residence? No problem — use these versatile products as your activity sidekicks.

WRIST AND ANKLE WEIGHTS

These soft doughnut-shaped weights slip onto your wrists or ankles to add resistance to your exercise moves. If you can grip objects easily, even soup cans will do the trick!

THERA-BANDS

These stretchy straps come in different levels of resistance. Loop them around your arms and pull them apart, or tie them to doorknobs or sturdy furniture and pull.

GYMSTICK

This stick designed for holding, is attached to resistance bands at both ends. You can loop these to your feet or wheelchair for more pull while you work out.

PILATESSTICK

This can be lodged in a doorway or mounted to a wall. A wheelchair can be wheeled right up to it.

STABILITY BALL

This soft PVC ball can be more than two feet (60 cm) in diameter and is easily incorporated into many different exercises. For example, sit on the ball, lift a leg and hold it, then lift the opposite arm. Even just sitting and bouncing on the ball will enhance the core stabilizing muscles in your back and abdomen.

Reap the rewards

While physical activity is good for everyone, regular exercise can make a particular difference to someone with mobility restrictions. It improves...

- flexibility
- balance
- strength
- posture
- circulation
- range of motion
- body awareness
- endurance

Notes of caution

Exercise safely! Keep the following tips in mind.

- Before starting a new exercise routine, get clearance from your health-care professional.
- Have a small snack an hour or two before working out.
- Drink plenty of water before, during and after exercise.
- Stop if you feel dizzy, light-headed or exhausted, or if you can't talk comfortably while exercising. 💡