Abdominal strength is important for everyone, but especially for older patients. The abdominal muscles consist of several layers of overlapping fibers: the rectus abdominus, which runs from the ribs to the pelvis, the internal and external obliques, which weave diagonally along each side of the body, and the transversalis abdominus muscles, which extend across the abdominal cavity from side to side and front to back. The once-traditional method for doing a sit-up, with the legs straight out in front of the body, is no longer considered an optimal position because it engages the hip flexors, which take away some of the work that the abdominal muscles should be doing. Doing sit-ups with the knees bent is a much more effective way to strengthen the muscles because it isolates them and makes them work harder. However, as with any exercises, remember that pain and strain do not add value, but only leave you stiff and sore.

As with any abdominal exercises, it is important to inhale before starting the exercise, then exhale while contracting the stomach muscles and inhale again when releasing from the contraction. It is also important to avoid placing the hands behind the head, which puts undue pressure on the neck. These exercises should be done daily. It is especially important for senior patients to do something moderate every day rather than do something excessive only a few times per week.

Encourage patients to start with 3 repetitions of each exercise daily and work their way up to 10-15 repetitions. Once they reach 10-15 repetitions, remind them that maintaining this level of exercise consistently should preserve their abdominal strength.

In next month’s column, I will discuss exercises to improve posture.

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To print the exercises published in this column as an 8½-by-11 handout, which you may photocopy for your patients, go to www.familypracticenews.com, select the Archive Collection, Exercise Rx, and Patient Handout.