

5 Muscles That Disappear First After 60 (& How to Rebuild)

<https://youtu.be/id2Zl9nsluI>

Channel: Will Harlow – Over-Fifties Specialist Physio

Duration: 13 minutes

Summary

Physiotherapist Will Harlow explains that age-related muscle loss (sarcopenia) doesn't affect every muscle equally. In his clinical experience, five muscle groups tend to weaken first, and losing strength in these muscles has a major impact on walking, balance, climbing stairs, reaching overhead, and maintaining independence.

His key message is that strength loss is not an inevitable consequence of ageing. With targeted resistance exercises performed consistently, most older adults can regain significant strength and function.

Note: The specific list of "five muscles that disappear first" is based on Will Harlow's clinical observations rather than an established scientific ranking. However, his emphasis on resistance training to combat age-related muscle loss is strongly supported by current evidence.

Why These Muscles Matter

Will explains that these muscle groups are essential for everyday activities such as:

- Standing up from a chair.
- Walking confidently.
- Climbing stairs.
- Lifting objects safely.
- Reaching overhead.
- Maintaining balance.

Weakness in these areas often leads people to compensate by:

- Using their hands to stand.
- Avoiding stairs.
- Walking more slowly.
- Becoming less active.

Unfortunately, these adaptations accelerate further muscle loss.

1. Quadriceps (Front of the Thigh)

The quadriceps are, in Will's view, the most important muscles for maintaining independence.

They are responsible for:

- Standing from a chair.
- Climbing stairs.
- Walking.
- Controlling the knees.

Signs of Weakness

You may notice:

- Pushing off with your hands to stand up.
- Difficulty climbing stairs.
- Legs feeling weak or "like jelly."

Will believes prolonged sitting and avoiding deep knee bends contribute to the quads gradually "switching off."

Recommended Exercise: Straight Leg Raise

He recommends:

- Lie on your back.
- One knee bent, the other leg straight.
- Tighten the thigh muscles.
- Lift the straight leg until both thighs are level.
- Lower slowly.

Suggested routine:

- 10–15 repetitions per leg
- 3 sets

He advises avoiding this exercise if it aggravates sciatica.

2. Gluteal Muscles (Buttocks)

The glutes provide power for:

- Walking.
- Climbing stairs.
- Standing upright.
- Lifting safely.

Signs of Weakness

People may:

- Lean forward while walking.
- Push themselves up using their hands.
- Feel as though their "bottom muscles have disappeared."

Recommended Exercise: Goblet Sit-to-Stand

Using a light weight held close to the chest:

- Lower until you lightly touch the chair.
- Stand back up immediately without fully sitting.

Suggested routine:

- 8–15 repetitions
- 3 sets
- Twice weekly

He notes that this exercise strengthens both the glutes and quadriceps while closely mimicking everyday movements.

3. Calf Muscles

Will describes the calves as the "engine room" of walking.

They:

- Push you forward.
- Help maintain balance.
- Support longer, more confident strides.

Signs of Weakness

You may experience:

- Shuffling gait.
- Walking becoming tiring.
- Reduced balance.

He points out that simply walking more may not fully strengthen weak calves, because they often require targeted resistance.

Recommended Exercise: Heel Raises on a Step

Using the edge of a step:

- Allow the heels to drop below the step to stretch the calves.
- Rise onto your tiptoes.
- Lower slowly.

Suggested routine:

- 8–15 repetitions
- 3 sets

As strength improves, progress to:

- Single-leg heel raises.
- Additional weight (such as wearing a backpack).

4. Rotator Cuff (Shoulder Muscles)

The rotator cuff is a group of small muscles that stabilise the shoulder.

They are essential for:

- Reaching overhead.
- Lifting objects.
- Putting on clothing.
- Everyday shoulder movement.

Signs of Weakness

Weakness may cause:

- Pain reaching into cupboards.
- Difficulty putting on a jacket.
- Reduced overhead strength.

Recommended Exercise: Resistance Band External Rotations

Using a light resistance band:

- Elbow bent to approximately 90°.
- Keep the elbow fixed against the side.
- Rotate the forearm outward.
- Return slowly.

Suggested routine:

- 8–15 repetitions
- 3 sets
- Twice weekly

He recommends using only a light band to maintain good technique.

5. Core Muscles

The final muscle group is the core, which provides stability during almost every movement.

A strong core supports:

- Balance.
- Turning.
- Reaching.
- Lower back stability.

Signs of Weakness

You may feel:

- Unsteady while moving.
- Less stable during twisting or reaching.
- More vulnerable to falls.

Recommended Exercise: Toe Taps

Lie on your back:

- Flatten the lower back against the floor.
- Lift both legs to tabletop position.
- Lower one foot to lightly touch the floor.
- Return and alternate sides.

The goal is to keep the lower back flat throughout the movement.

Suggested routine:

- 8–15 repetitions per leg
- 3 sets

Stop if you can no longer maintain proper form.

One Patient's Experience

Will describes a woman in her early 70s who completed this routine consistently for eight weeks.

According to him, she experienced:

- Easier walking.
- Greater confidence standing from chairs.
- Less shoulder discomfort.
- Improved stability.

He presents this as an illustration of how targeted strength training can improve function in older adults.

General Training Principles

Across all five exercises, Will recommends:

- 8–15 repetitions
- 3 sets
- Around 1 minute of rest between sets
- Performing the routine twice per week

He advises stopping any exercise that causes pain and consulting a healthcare professional if symptoms persist.

Overall Takeaway

Will Harlow's central message is that maintaining independence after 60 depends on preserving strength in a handful of key muscle groups, particularly the:

- Quadriceps.
- Glutes.
- Calves.
- Rotator Cuff.
- Core.

Rather than relying solely on walking, he recommends adding targeted resistance exercises that mimic everyday movements. These exercises can help improve mobility, balance, confidence, and the ability to perform daily tasks.

Although ageing naturally leads to some muscle loss, his message is optimistic: consistent strength training remains one of the most effective ways to slow, prevent, and even reverse much of this decline.