

Active seniors curb health care costs

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Group Health seniors are not only sweating to the oldies in local health clubs. They are also keeping health care costs down, according to a study by researchers at Group Health and the University of Washington (UW). The study appears in the January 2008 issue of the journal *Preventing Chronic Disease*.

The research found long-term total health care costs grew more slowly for older Group Health patients who regularly used their "SilverSneakers" health club benefit. Group Health members age 65 and older can choose either or both of two activity programs: EnhanceFitness or SilverSneakers, which includes access to a health club and free physical activity classes geared to seniors' needs.

"Physical activity can help seniors improve their balance to prevent falls; boost cardiovascular health to prevent heart attacks; and improve overall metabolism to help delay diabetes onset and complication of diabetes," said study co-author Dr. James LoGerfo, a professor of medicine and health services at the UW and an affiliate investigator at the Group Health Center for Health Studies.

The researchers studied nearly 5,000 senior Group Health patients who participated in SilverSneakers. More than 9,000 control patients were matched to participants by age and sex. By year two, compared with control participants, SilverSneakers participants had significantly fewer inpatient admissions and lower total health care costs.

Lorraine and Jack Swisher of Bellevue are Group Health members and

regulars at the Bellevue Family YMCA SilverSneakers. Age 73 and 75, respectively, they both have chronic conditions and believe their increased physical activity has let them stay healthy and save their funds to travel to Antarctica, snorkel the Great Barrier Reef, and go on a recent safari in Africa. Granted, few seniors are quite as active or well-traveled as the Swishers, but the researchers said that all people can benefit from regular physical activity.

"The class is a very social time for everyone, plus it helps me with my balance and flexibility," said Lorraine. "The exercises can be adapted to any ability, and you can easily practice them while traveling or at home."

Dr. Huong Q. Nguyen, assistant professor of biobehavioral nursing systems at the UW, is the study's lead author. She stresses the important takeaway from this study is for older adults, especially on fixed incomes, to remain active and incorporate physical activity in their lives for many reasons, including cutting down on unexpected health care costs. The other important message is for health plans that offer such physical activity benefits to have mechanisms in place that support wide adoption and consistent use by senior members.

"Silver Sneakers is one of the few programs that health plans can offer which have been shown to benefit their senior population, said LoGerfo. "Another is EnhanceFitness, a program for seniors available locally in community and senior centers around Puget Sound and Spokane. The program focuses on simple exercises that build not only flexibility and aerobic fitness but also balance and strength, which are the most important elements for preventing falls." Group Health offers both programs.

Source: Group Health Cooperative Center for Health Studies

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