

Seniors must use it or lose it, study shows

November 17 2009, by Laura Thompson

(PhysOrg.com) -- Doris Stinson has learned that it's never too late to start exercising. The 85-year-old Stoney Creek woman has regained her strength and maintained her independence after enrolling in Hamilton-based physical maintenance program for frail seniors.

She became a participant in the Stay Well program about two years ago after undergoing her second hip replacement surgery. Since then, she has not looked back.

"I've come along a lot better because of this program," she said. "The social part of it is really nice, too. You meet a lot of people. We're all here to do same thing, actually. And it does help."

In a paper published in the journal *Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation*, McMaster researchers have found that frail [seniors](#) who participated in the Stay Well program for one year experienced improved physical abilities and a significant reduction in their use of health-care services. As well, a year after enrolling in the program, none of the participants had been admitted to hospital in the previous six months.

"There doesn't appear to be an extended period of illness or hospitalization for most of our participants. They're maintained in the community - and they're able to go through the aging process more successfully," said David Cowan, a geriatrician and associate professor of medicine at McMaster University. Cowan co-founded the Stay Well program with Irene Turpie, a professor emeritus of the Department of Medicine at McMaster.

Study participants were placed in one of two streams. The first program, for very frail adults, consisted of a group exercise session that included seated aerobics, walking (with or without a walking aid), strength training, balance and flexibility movements and activities to improve eye-hand coordination and dexterity. The second program, for frail individuals who could participate more independently, used available gym equipment.

To assess the effectiveness of the program, participants' use of health services, heart rate, functional status and health-related quality of life were measured at enrolment and one-year after entering the program.

Although there were no significant differences in health-related quality of life, there were improvements in physical function and resting heart rate after one year. This is important because the literature suggests that this frail population would normally decline over this time period. There was also a significant reduction in the number of patients who visited family physicians, medical specialists and the hospital emergency department.

The research team concluded that the Stay Well program represents is a cost-effective strategy for promoting regular [exercise](#), health and safety in frail older adults who want to maintain their independence in the community. As well, since there is no time limitation on the program, it also provides an opportunity for participants to maintain physical health over the long-term.

Provided by McMaster University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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