

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Helping Older People Be Active at Home: The Effectiveness of the Home Support Exercise Program

Description of this Report

This report reviews the benefits and cost-effectiveness of formal and informal activity programs aimed at older adults, especially programs for adults trying to be more active where they live. The report helps build the case for helping older adults stay active at home and for the effectiveness of programs such as the Home Support Exercise Program (HSEP).

There are 17 pages of text and 12 pages of references and further reading. The references will be very helpful for those who would like further information and to strengthen their own arguments for the benefits of physical activity for older adults.

Who Is this Report for?

This resource supports organizations, program planners, health region staff, and decision-makers in justifying programs such as HSEP.

The Benefits of Physical Activity for Older Adults

- About 60% or more of older Canadians are insufficiently active. These activity levels decline even further with advancing age. Physical inactivity remains stubbornly high among seniors 75 years and older, although even mild activity has proven physical and mental benefits for seniors of all ages. Changing from a sedentary, physically inactive lifestyle, to participating in mild to moderate physical activity regularly is an important step towards maintaining or improving health (National Advisory Council on Aging, 2003).

Older people tend to become institutionalized when they become too stiff, too weak, too stooped, and too unsteady to live safely in their homes (O'Brien Cousins, 2003a). Functional issues such as falling may be linked to certain medications, but falls can also result from poor posture, musculoskeletal weakness, poor circulation mechanisms, and reduced kinaesthetic awareness from years of sitting (O'Brien Cousins & Goodwin, 2002).

- The proof of this disadvantaged aging is seen in the exponential increase of care costs with increasing age. According to the National Advisory Council on Aging (1997), of all seniors' disabilities, the most common are those affecting mobility (74.2%) and agility (65%).
- We know that even 10 minutes count towards the optimal total of 30 to 60 minutes daily, regardless of age (Health Canada, 1999a). Keeping elders functioning well in their own homes is considered the best course of action for individual life quality.



The Cost-Effectiveness and Benefits of Programs such as HSEP

- For about \$92 per HSEP client, we can expect to improve functional status for muscle strength, joint mobility, confidence in balance, and walking performance. To add to this list of positive results, clients report falling asleep better, improved sleep, more energy and endurance, and improved mood.
- HSEP clients generally feel better and function more independently, putting less of a load on the care provider. This time can be traded in on more support for healthy lifestyle choices such as active living everyday. In this way, “downriver care” is shifted to less expensive “upstream management.”
- Available cost-benefit analyses suggest that the expense of simple exercise programs for seniors can be more than met through savings in both medical expenses and the demands for institutional support (Shephard, 1997).
- Regular enjoyable exercise is currently the most significant route to better health and is a more straightforward and economical means to lifelong health than medication and acute care. In light of the strength of the evidence on the benefits of physical activity, the focus of future action resides mainly in the identification and implementation of successful interventions for older adults (Division of Aging & Seniors, Public Health Agency of Canada, 2002a).

Photo courtesy of the Canadian Centre for Activity and Aging.