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Older Adults Gain Strength in Community Workout Programs

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Older adults who participate regularly in physical activity programs in their community can see noticeable improvement in upper- and lower-body strength, IPRC's Susan Hughes and colleagues.

Although past research has shown that exercising three to five times per week for at least 30 minutes has many health benefits, more than 60 percent of older adults do not exercise so consistently.

"Some do not participate because they may not realize that exercise still provides benefits at older ages; some have chronic conditions that they worry could be made worse by exercise; and some can't find a good program at a good price at a convenient location," said Susan Hughes, director of IPRC's Center for Research on Health and Aging.

The study looked at whether attending a best-practice exercise program in the community would influence older adults' exercise participation and provide other health benefits. The findings appear in the February issue of the American Journal of Public Health.

Hughes and her colleagues evaluated three exercise programs that were among 10 program winners of a national competition conducted by the Center for Healthy Aging of the National Council on Aging in 2003. Community organizations serving older adults operated all three programs, which included flexibility, aerobic and strengthening exercises.

The researchers enrolled 544 participants, with an average age of 66 years, who had evaluations before the exercise program began and at five- and 10- month intervals.

The participants underwent testing on various physical skills, such as lower-extremity muscle strength with a "sit-stand" test, upper-body strength with an arm-curl test and a six-minute distance walk. Hughes and her colleagues also monitored participants' weekly attendance.

Although there were no significant differences in some of the outcomes, such as body weight or general health, the researchers found that those seniors who participated in the community programs increased their frequency of total physical activity by 26 percent, compared with 9 percent in the control group.

In addition, before the exercise program, all participants averaged 26 stands per minute on the sit-stand test. However, after five months those in the treatment group performed better, completing 31 stands per minute, a 19 percent increase.

On the arm-curl test, participants averaged 15 arm curls in 30 seconds before the exercise program. Those in the treatment group performed significantly better at 5 months, completing 18 arm curls in 30 seconds (a 22 percent increase). At 10 months, they averaged 20 arm curls in 30 seconds, representing a 33 percent increase.

The authors concluded that these programs could lower seniors' risk of future disability. They suggested that community partners and national agencies support exercise programs like these because of their relatively low cost compared to the cost of medical care.

Read the [abstract](#) of Hughes's article.

This article was written by Glenda Fauntleroy of the [Health Behavior News Service](#).

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