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OPAL
Older People with Active Lifestyles
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Aging and mobility

by Michael Yonas, DrPH
For New Pittsburgh Courier

This month’s special section on aging and mobility is a continuation of the monthly series started last year, focusing on health disparities in the Pittsburgh region. It is a collaboration among the New Pittsburgh Courier, Community PARTners (a core service of the University of Pittsburgh’s Clinical and Translational Science Institute—CTSI) and the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh. Michael Yonas, DrPH, assistant professor of family medicine at Pitt, sat down with Esther L. Bush, president and CEO of the Urban League, to talk about this month’s focus.

MY: Ms. Bush, your opinion on the previous health disparities and research awareness segments has been so insightful. What are your thoughts about this month’s overview on healthy aging?

EB: Aging is a particularly relevant issue here in Allegheny County, where we have one of the nation’s largest populations of older Americans. Pittsburgh’s reputation as “America’s Livable City” makes it very attractive to lots of people from all backgrounds, and, of course, lots of retirees, as well. Let’s make it a point to keep the “living” in livable city by making a commitment to having a long and healthy life! Being more active is not only good for our physical health, but it contributes mightily to our mental health as we are able to get out in our communities and interact with others.

MY: I was happy to see the word getting out about what a resource we have locally with the University of Pittsburgh’s Pepper Center. The Pepper Center’s research is dedicated to increasing knowledge that will lead to better ways for older Americans to maintain or regain independence.

ELB: Yes, and I especially like the Pepper Center’s focus on promoting wellness through prevention. It is so important—at ALL stages of our life—for us to be informed and BE ACTIVE! In order to prevent and address the disparities in diabetes, cardiovascular disease and mobility that we see among Blacks and Whites here in Pittsburgh, it is especially important that older Blacks get involved and learn more about the opportunities to living more active lives.

MY: I have learned a lot from this month’s segment, especially with regard to the importance and value of being active later in life and the research that is being done to learn more about how to help this happen.

EB: Absolutely, Michael. I thought it was great to learn about some of the interesting and exciting research studies that are going on right here in Pittsburgh. Dancing, walking groups and meeting with friends sound like fun, and if these studies help us learn more about how to safely increase mobility for older adults of all backgrounds, that just makes it a big win/win!

MY: You and I both have participated in research studies at the University of Pittsburgh in the past. From your experience, is there anything that you would like to tell others if they were interested in participating in any research study?

EB: Well, I’d tell them that the studies highlighted on this page sound like a lot of fun and a great opportunity to bring exercise into their lives. Also, it’s important for people to know that not all research studies include medical procedures. Some, like those highlighted here, actually require participants to just try new forms of physical activity. And, while participants are involved, they receive the support of health care and research experts. Before participating in any research study though, ask questions! Ask about the risks and benefits of being in the study, and remember that being in a research study is always voluntary. I encourage Allegheny County seniors to consider joining the Pepper Center’s research registry so they can stay informed about new research studies for which they may be eligible. Joining a registry is a great way to stay informed, and it’s important to know that when joining a registry, there is never any obligation to participate in research.

The Pepper Registry is a voluntary database of people ages 60 and older who are interested in hearing about new research studies. If you are interested in joining, please call Courtney at 412-692-2331 or Jennifer at 800-872-3653.

University of Pittsburgh ctsi

The Clinical and Translational Science Institute has one mission: to facilitate the translation of research advances into clinical and public health practice and policy—bridging the laboratory bench to patient bedside to community-based practice. To achieve this goal, CTSI is working to join together existing programs with new initiatives to create an awareness and understanding of the benefits to health that can be realized from research. CTSI has established 10 core divisions to take on this mission. Community PARTners (Partnering to Assist Research and Translation) is one of these cores. It aims to be an essential link between the University and the community, which is why they are teaming up with the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh and the New Pittsburgh Courier to let people know about health information and research that is going on right now.

Research studies need participants of all ages, genders, races, and ethnic groups. Some studies need healthy participants, while others need people with specific health problems. The research participant registry is a voluntary database of people who are willing to consider participation in research studies. Its goal is to bring the advancements of medical research more directly and quickly to those who can benefit from them. Although the research participant registry is a joint effort between the University of Pittsburgh and UPMC, you do not need to be a patient in the UPMC health care system to sign up for the registry. If you decide to join, you may:

• Learn ways to possibly improve your health
• Gain access to new medications, tests, and programs before they become widely available or that may not be available outside of research
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Walk yourself to good health

Grocery shopping, playing with the kids, bathing, going to work—these are activities many of us do regularly without much thought. But, imagine if you had trouble moving around or walking: How would you perform the demands of daily life? Most of us take good mobility—the ability to move well and easily—for granted, but it is one of the most important ways to stay healthy and is one of the most common ways our function becomes limited as we age. In fact, studies have shown that walking speed is a powerful predictor of how healthy you are and will be in the future. By age 75, more than half of us will have trouble walking just a few blocks (as seen in Figure 1).

When people have trouble getting around, they are less independent, and falling is more common. Irregular sidewalks, a lack of handrails and poor lighting near stairs and poorly marked curbs can increase the risk of falls for anyone. Falls are a real problem in older people because they can lead to serious injuries, such as breaking bones or suffering serious cuts. When older people with poor mobility start feeling afraid they'll fall, that fear will keep them from going out and doing all the things they used to. In some people, that fear of falling is so strong that they become afraid to leave the house, which seriously affects their ability to perform basic life tasks or have social and family connections.

Unfortunately, trouble walking is not only more common with increasing age, but it is also more common in women than in men and in African Americans compared to other populations. Figure 1 also shows that African Americans and Whites are very different when it comes to walking: In most age groups, African American men and women have more trouble walking when compared to White men and women. In the African American community, problems with mobility become more common earlier in middle age. Many factors contribute to poor mobility, including arthritis, obesity, pain, heart and lung problems, nervous system disorders, diabetes and problems with vision. Some of these conditions, such as arthritis, diabetes and vision problems, are known to be especially common among African Americans.

Fortunately, new ways to identify and treat walking and balance problems exist, as do many new approaches to keeping or improving mobility. The Claude D. Pepper Older American Independence Center, a National Institute on Aging-funded center of excellence at the University of Pittsburgh, is dedicated to improving mobility and balance through research into causes, prevention and treatment.

One of the best ways to achieve good mobility is to be or remain active. Stephanie Studenski, MD, MPH, is a professor of medicine, director of research in Pitt's division of geriatric medicine, and director of the Pepper Center. She encourages people to start walking regularly, no matter what their age, but warns against people pushing themselves to walk if they don’t already.

“The body chooses the best walking speed, so work with your doctor to become more active,” Studenski says. “Exercise is the closest thing we have to a fountain of youth.”
Two types of exercise for midlife women

We all know that exercise is good for us, but it is often really hard to start or stick to an exercise program. Many reasons keep us from exercising—busy schedules, limited ability to travel, weather and even the sometimes boring nature of exercise routines. These problems are often especially hard on women in midlife, who often have demanding responsibilities at work and at home. One of the ways to overcome these barriers to exercise is to make it more convenient and more fun. Also, while exercise is likely to help with fitness, strength and possibly weight loss, exercise might also help with concentration and alertness.

The University of Pittsburgh Pepper Center is offering a research study of two types of exercise—brisk walking or dancing. This study is for women aged 50 to 65 who are not currently exercising and are at or above their recommended body weight. The study assesses exercise effects on fitness, strength, weight control, mental concentration as well as enjoyment.

To be in the study, participants will first undergo health screening and, if eligible, will be randomized (like flipping a coin) to one type of exercise. Participants will be expected to come to the exercise program in Oakland twice a week for two weeks and then once a week for another several weeks.

Two types of exercise for older persons

Walking problems, such as walking slower and greater effort to walk, are common among older people. Some older people have similar complaints about thinking and describe thinking as seeming slower and sometimes requiring more effort. Exercise has been shown to improve walking ability and has been helpful in improving thinking, but the best exercise to enhance good walking and good thinking ability is not known. It is important in maintaining safety and daily life activities to know if some type of exercise can help walking while thinking.

The University of Pittsburgh Pepper Center is offering a research study of two types of walking exercise—walking for fitness and walking as a skill. This study is for adults ages 65 and older who have some difficulty walking and thinking. In the study, the effect of supervised exercise on walking ability, thinking ability and walking while thinking, as well as confidence in walking and daily activities, is assessed. To be in the study, participants will first undergo a screening of health and of walking and thinking ability. If eligible, participants will be randomized (like flipping a coin) to one type of exercise. Participants will be expected to come to the exercise program in Oakland two to three times a week for 12 weeks. Researchers will evaluate the effects of the exercise programs midway (at six weeks) and at the end (at 12 weeks). Willing participants may also have a brain scan at the beginning and after 12 weeks. Reimbursement is provided for participants’ time and transportation costs related to the scheduled assessments. For further information, contact Courtney at 412-692-2331.

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Early Planning and the Right Help Can Go a Long Way

The senior years can bring about many changes in your life. Some are welcome and long-awaited, while others may be unexpected or difficult.

For Allegheny County adults 60 years and over, the Area Agency on Aging is the main resource for a wide range of programs and services to ensure continued independent living in the home and community. It’s never too early for older adults and their caregivers to call the Area Agency on Aging for the information and assistance they need now and to develop a plan for the years ahead.

The senior years can be both rewarding and challenging, but you don’t have to go it alone. The Area Agency on Aging can be with you every step of the way to help make these the “golden years.”

Call the Area Agency on Aging Senior Line at 412-350-5460, or visit www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/olderadults.aspx to learn about the services available to you.
Exercise program takes community-based approach

As you may have noticed by the other research study descriptions in this section, improving walking and promoting independence are important to University of Pittsburgh researchers. Some researchers, like Jennifer Brach, PhD, PT, associate professor of physical therapy in the School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, are taking a community-based approach in developing new programs to improve walking in older adults.

The project “On the Move”, funded by the University of Pittsburgh Aging Institute, was developed by physical therapists with valuable input from older adults within the community. Researchers held several focus groups to obtain feedback from older adults and then modified the program accordingly.

Because walking is key to maintaining independence, this program focuses on the timing and coordination of stepping and walking and is set to follow the beat of music popular with the older adults.

Unlike other programs that are mainly conducted in a sitting position, “On the Move” is unique because it is conducted mainly from standing or walking positions. Dr. Brach and colleagues are currently testing this program at various UPMC Independent Living Facilities.

Participants have been thrilled with the program. One older adult commented that as a result of the exercise program, she “doesn’t walk like an old lady anymore.” Dr. Brach is eager to expand this project to include new partners throughout the community, including senior high rises and community centers.

For more information, please contact Lisa Guizzetti, Community PARTners project coordinator at 1-866-422-1575.

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New research shows people over 50 look forward to golden years, with ‘good health’ and ‘wisdom’ as leading reasons

(ARA) — With 10,000 Americans turning 65 every day—and according to recently released research, a majority of them expecting to live to nearly 90—the celebration of older Americans is a developing trend, and more people are aspiring to live longer and better than ever before.

The latest research conducted by Gallup and Robinson as part of Pfizer’s Get Old initiative asked more than 1,000 Americans 18 to 65+ years old how they feel about getting old. The results showed that priorities and perceptions about aging shift over time.

Key findings of the research include:

- Nearly half of those over 50 (41 percent) said they were “optimistic” about getting old as compared with “uneasy,” “angry” or “prepared”
- A vast majority of those who feel aging is better than expected cite good health (74 percent), wisdom (72 percent) and greater appreciation for friends and family (72 percent) as the top reasons
- 51 percent of all people surveyed think they look younger than their age, and 40 percent think they are wiser than their age
- Given a list of lifetime achievements, those 18 to 34 (45 percent) rank having $1 million first, while those over 65 (48 percent) would rather see their grandchild graduate from college

“We all have one thing in common—each day we get older. At every age and stage of our lives, we can make choices and take actions that will help us live longer and better. There are so many positive role models today who are changing how people think about aging,” said Dr. Freda Lewis-Hall, Pfizer’s Chief Medical Officer. “There’s a huge opportunity to support the shift that’s underway. At GetOld.com, we want to hear what people want and need to live better and healthier and create a forum for dialogue on what it means to ‘get old’ today.”

The Get Old initiative is supported by the following leading organizations: Easter Seals, International Longevity Center at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, Men’s Health Network, National Alliance for Caregiving, National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship, National Consumers League, National Family Caregivers Association, Patient Advocate Foundation, Society for Women’s Health Research, Visiting Nurse Associations of America and WomenHeart: The National Coalition for Women with Heart Disease.

The goal of Get Old is to amplify the conversation on aging and learn more about how Americans at all ages are tackling aging for themselves, their family, and society. At the center of the initiative is a first-of-its-kind online community, GetOld.com, where people can discuss aging by sharing and viewing stories, photos, and videos about getting old. The site provides people the opportunity to vote on how they feel about aging: Angry, Uneasy, Optimistic or Prepared.
The Pennsylvania Lottery generated more than $1 billion last year to programs that benefit older Pennsylvanians.

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