



Continuous Scale Physical Functional Performance

Evaluation of Functional Performance in Older Adults



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Study: Regular walking nearly halves elderly disability risk

Athens, Ga. – Older adults can decrease their risk of disability and increase their likelihood of maintaining independence by 41 percent by participating in a walking exercise program, according to a new University of Georgia study.

The study, which appears in the current issue of the *Journal of Geriatric Physical Therapy*, also found that walking program participants increased their peak aerobic capacity by 19 percent when compared to a control group and increased their physical function by 25 percent.

Twenty-six low-income adults aged 60 and older to either a walking exercise group, which met three times a week for four months, or a nutrition education control group. Initially, the group would walk for 10 minutes continually. As the weeks progressed, they increased their walking time to 40 continuous minutes. Each session began with a 10-minute warm-up and ended with a 10-minute cool-down that included balance and flexibility exercises. The researchers found that physical function increased by 25 percent in the walking exercise group, compared to a decrease of 1 percent in the control group. And while the control group saw their risk of disability increase over the four-month period, the walking exercise group saw their disability risk go from 66 percent to 25 percent – a decrease of 41 percent in just four months.

“In the past decade, researchers have focused on the benefits of strength training in maintaining independence, but until now we didn’t have good

evidence using an objective performance measure that a walking program would improve physical functioning,” said study co-author M. Elaine Cress, professor of kinesiology and researcher in the UGA Institute of Gerontology. “Our study found that walking offers tremendous health benefits that can help older adults stay independent.”

Trudy Moore-Harrison, the lead author of the study and a former UGA doctoral student, explained that the researchers focused their study on low-income individuals because people with fewer financial resources are less likely to be physically active and are more likely to have chronic health conditions and lack health care coverage. “People really enjoyed the program,” said Moore-Harrison, now a post-doctoral fellow at the University of North Carolina Charlotte. “It gave them an opportunity to make new friends and get to know their neighbors.”

The research was supported by the UGA Institute of Gerontology Seed Grant, the Northeast Georgia Area Agency on Aging and the Georgia Gerontology Consortium Seed Grant. The research was done in cooperation with the Athens Housing Authority.

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