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## Function or Fun?

by Mary Chachas

### What Motivates Us to 'Get Movin' Depends on Age

Many Americans may be surprised at the extent and strength of the evidence linking physical activity to numerous health improvements. Most significantly, regular physical activity greatly reduces the risk of dying from coronary heart disease, the leading cause of death in the United States. Physical activity also reduces the risk of developing diabetes, hypertension, and colon cancer; enhances mental health; fosters healthy muscles, bones and joints; and helps maintain function and preserve independence in older adults.

The first Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity, 1996

Knowing that physical activity is good for us is one thing. Doing what we know is good for us is another.

So what makes physical activity or exercise worth the effort?

For middle-aged and older overweight women, it's improved function: having more energy, being able to climb stairs without trouble, sleeping better and finding playtime with grandchildren easier, according to Patricia Gillett, Ph.D., associate professor at the College of Nursing. A certified health and fitness instructor, she has spent 15 years studying overweight women and exercise.

"Physical function, not fitness, is what we should be measuring," she says, not that fitness and function don't go hand in hand, and improvement in one can lead to improvement in the other.

At the other end of the age spectrum, adolescent girls attending "U Move with the Starzz" once a week after school are motivated by fun. The program, designed by Doris L. Watson, Ph.D., teams up the College of Health with the WNBA Utah Starzz.

Research has shown that middle school-age girls are the most inactive group in our society. Convincing these girls to become active and to incorporate physical activity into their lives is the aim of Watson, assistant professor of exercise and sport science.

Five-year Women's Fitness Study

Gillett studied middle-aged and older overweight women from 1990-96 with funding from the National Institutes of Health. Women who received education about physical fitness plus structured group exercise were compared with women who received education but exercised on their own. Physical fitness as well as health criteria (blood pressure, cholesterol and body composition) were measured. Diet was not part of the study. Half of the study involved women aged 49-59; the other, women 60-70.

The findings were surprising to Gillett. During the first four months, there were big changes in the group that exercised together. By six months, however, those improvements started falling off, and the women who exercised on their own were doing better.

"When the class ended, the exercise group-without a nurse to lead them and no place to go-didn't continue any type of activity. Women who met only for the education segment established a habit of activity on their own and stayed with it. For most, it was something as basic as walking," Gillett said.

She's now designing a study to evaluate the effect of a community-based, individualized lifestyle activity program on the health and physical function of obese 55- to 75-year-old women. Outcomes to be measured include body composition, blood pressure, stair-climbing ability and walking distance, among others.

Six months of structured intervention will be followed by six months of transitional activity (a weaning away from structure), then 12 months of maintenance, with the women exercising on their own.

The goal of the study is to increase women's level of physical functioning (climb stairs, lift and carry groceries, walk a distance) by motivating them to increase their everyday physical activity.

Gillett teaches a class for women 50-65 through the University's Academic Outreach and Continuing Education program at the U of U Sandy center. Beginning-level, low-impact dance exercise, along with resistance and stretching exercises, are offered two mornings a week.

Although the trend is away from group exercise, some women enjoy exercising with others. According to Gillett, two factors that make a group program successful are a friendly environment and a sense of privacy, meaning exercising with a peer group,

not younger, more fit women. Unfortunately, Gillett says, there are very few group programs that offer exercise at a level low enough for obese older women.

For physical activity to succeed, women have to eliminate personal barriers, including the excuse that they're "too busy." For these women, other priorities, such as family, care-giving, housework and volunteer work, are more important than themselves, Gillett says.

Other excuses include the self-perception that "I'm too old," "I have a low energy level," and "I don't think I can do it."

Older women who undertake an exercise program shouldn't try to do too much at once. "The important thing is to have success early," Gillett advises. "If they see improvement, regardless of how small it seems, they will continue. These women should focus on well-being and function. If they can improve that, their lives will be very much better."

#### 'U Move with the Starzz'

More than 100 girls participate in the "U Move with the Starzz" program, which runs through the school year. Bryant Intermediate, Northwest Middle and Eisenhower Junior High schools are sites for the Physical Activity Camps (PACs). Next fall, Glendale Middle and West High also will participate. The sessions begin at 3 p.m. and draw 30-40 students at each school. After a high-energy warm-up, there's a weekly lesson focus, such as a fitness-and-exercise session with music and rotations among different "stations" around the floor.

"We also promote communication and problem solving, and try to create a community for these young women, so part of the reinforcement and carry-over comes in the form of monthly newsletters," Watson said.

Watson estimated that one-third of the girls are overweight, but they don't seem to be particularly bothered by this. "We know that teens like fast food, so our message is 'If you're going to eat there, you've got to know how to make it healthier.' Our January newsletter listed suggestions for better fast-food choices," Watson said.

Additional reinforcement comes with the twice-monthly breakout sessions. Topics focus on activity, nutrition and wellness, and participants make a pledge to change an unhealthy behavior to a healthy one.

Ten University students from a physical education methods class and from a sport science service learning class are assigned to each site. "This allows a 1:3 or 1:4 ratio, which is wonderful for making friends with the girls," Watson said.

School administrators have been very supportive, said Watson, who also invites physical education teachers to observe the program. "The teachers are super and are very involved. They're critical for good follow-up for our program. And, we have one principal who rarely misses a session."

Starzz personnel visit the after-school activity camps, and participating girls try to earn enough "frequent fitness" mile points to reach the hometown of a selected Starzz player. Points are awarded for doing activities, ranging from walking a dog to playing tag to raking leaves.

Watson, who was named the 1999-2000 Public Service Professor by the U of U's Bennion Community Service Center and received \$5,000 for the program, is especially excited about West High's participation, because the middle schools feed into it. If sixth-graders from Lincoln and Rose Park elementary schools could participate, then students could be active in the program for a number of years.

"There could be a long-term carryover, greatly increasing the chance that these kids could truly become physically active and remain active throughout their lives," Watson believes. "They'd have a lifestyle that would serve them well." ?

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