



STRATEGY 13

Help Older Adults Improve or Maintain Their Physical Activity, Strength, Flexibility, and Balance

Local parks and recreation departments should convene and partner with senior centers, local health departments, Senior Games, faith-based organizations, other community activity organizations (e.g., YMCAs), local business representatives, health care payers, local planning entities, Senior Health Insurance Information Programs (SHIIP), and SNAP-Ed-implementing agencies to:

- a. Learn from and engage with older adult community members about their preferences and needs for activities to improve or maintain their physical activity and strength.
- b. Identify and increase implementation and use of programs and services to encourage physical activity and the maintenance of strength across different levels of physical ability among older adults, including evidence-based fall-prevention programs. This work should include an examination of how accessible and welcoming programs are for different groups within the community based on income, race, ethnicity, and physical and sensory disability status.
- c. Identify safety concerns and access considerations for older adults to engage in physical activity in the community (e.g., community safety, access to sidewalks, fall risks on streets and sidewalks, indoor and outdoor activity options, and virtual exercise programs) and partner with local government leaders and planners to develop options to address concerns.

Desired Result – Overall physical strength and capacity of older adults will be increased.

Why does the task force recommend this strategy? – Physical activity encompasses a range of activities, such as aerobic exercise, strength training, yoga, and balance development. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), adults aged 65 and older should engage in at least 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity activities, such as walking, and two days a week of strength training.⁴⁷ Regular physical activity can decrease the risk of falls and prevent or delay many health issues, such as heart disease and some types of cancer, as well reducing symptoms of depression.^{48,49}

As adults age, they face the potential loss of strength, endurance, and balance; regular physical activity can help prevent and manage these experiences as well as disease. Physical activity programs and facilities for older adults should account for the preferences and physiological changes that older adults may have.

Context – While physical activity is an important component of maintaining health for older adults, it can be a challenge to achieve. According to America's Health Rankings:

- 19% of North Carolinians aged 65 and older say that they have met federal physical activity guidelines in the past 30 days.^{B,50}
- 28% of North Carolinians aged 65 and older say that they have done no physical activity or exercise other than their regular job in the past 30 days.⁵¹

Community Leadership in Physical Activity

Local parks play a significant role in physical activity within a community. People with access to parks and trails tend to walk and engage in more physical activity than those with limited access.⁵² Recreation departments and YMCAs can offer indoor facilities that provide a dedicated space for a variety of affordable physical activities. Local parks and recreation centers can provide the physical spaces for special programs like Senior Games, a year-round health promotion program for adults aged 50 years and older to compete in sports and arts categories.

Faith-based organizations serve as a source of trust and social support for many older adults. Partnering with local parks and recreation centers and YMCAs would allow these organizations to serve as connectors for those who may not otherwise have access to facilities or fitness education.

SNAP-Ed, which provides nutrition education related to Food and Nutrition Services (also known as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP]), takes the form of many different programs in North Carolina. For example, the North Carolina Nutrition Education Program offers education on a healthy diet, obesity prevention, and physical activity education.⁵³ Partnering with local parks and recreation centers will allow for a space to educate older adults on physical activities and nutrition best suited for their health.

Understanding Older Adult Preferences for Physical Activity

Engaging older adults in activities that they prefer raises the likelihood of continued physical activity.^{54,55} An evaluation of many research articles on older adult physical activity preferences noted that walking was the preferred method. Other preferred modes of activity were swimming or aqua fitness, aerobic activities, gardening, and dancing. The study noted variability in the preferred social context (i.e., solitary or group setting) for exercise depending on age. However, the authors identified a significant limitation in the available research: much of the research base on this topic focused on White female populations. This emphasizes the need to engage a representative group of community members to understand the variety of preferences that different parts of the population may have for physical activity options depending on age, income, race, ethnicity, and disability status.

Safety and Accessibility of Exercise Programming

Individuals who lead exercise classes and programs for older adults need an understanding of the specific health and safety needs of this population; for example, the necessity of maintaining coordination, balance, and strength to prevent injuries, such as those that occur from falls.⁵⁶ There are several organizations that provide this certification, such as the National Academy of Sports Medicine.

^B Federal physical activity guidelines are 150 minutes of moderate or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity and two days of muscle strengthening per week. https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/measures/exercise_sr

Aging is heterogeneous, with older adults experiencing a multitude of levels of capability. The accessibility of programming is integral to success and properly trained instructors can contribute to program safety by implementing tools such as a chair to maintain balance and maximize the abilities of a wide range of older adults.

In addition, with higher temperatures becoming more common, especially in summer months, access to indoor exercise spaces is an important consideration. Hot weather can pose risks to all people and older adults are at greater risks, particularly those with pre-existing health conditions.⁵⁷ Exercising in cooler spaces is a safer option during particularly hot days.

How would this impact the health of older adults?



People who engage in physical activity to maintain their strength and flexibility have a reduced risk of falling.



Increased physical activity provides the ability to have increased mobility in the community.



Nutrition education services can help older adults understand their unique nutrition needs.



Group exercises can provide social connections.