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Contact: Robert Smith

Director of Public Relations

Visiting Nurse Association

(214) 689-2609

PHYSICAL THERAPY HELPS THE ELDERLY MAINTAIN INDEPENDENT LIVING

Physical functioning often declines with advancing age and can result in deterioration of health and the ability to care for one's self. Key to physical functioning is muscle strength, which declines by 15 percent each decade after age 50 and 30 percent for each decade after age 70. This is mainly the result of muscle loss, which occurs more often in older women than men. Forty-five percent of women older than age 65 and 65 percent of those older than age 75 cannot lift 10 pounds.

Seniors, though, can regain strength with the help of a physical therapist. Physical therapists are known to work with patients recovering from illness or surgery and those with neuromuscular disorders such as cerebral palsy, Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, Lou Gehrig's disease, among others.

Physical therapy can also improve the functional ability of older adults through strength and balance training. Strength training helps prevent the loss of bone density and muscle mass that leads to frailty and physical disability. When combined with balance training, it can significantly reduce the high risk of falls for the elderly. Between one third and one half of the senior population falls at least once a year, often causing hip fractures, other injuries, or death. Falling is the number one cause of injury in the home for the elderly.

Research funded by the National Institute on Aging and published in The New England Journal of Medicine provides additional evidence that physical therapy can reduce and even prevent the functional decline of frail elderly individuals who receive a

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program designed to improve their balance, strength, and movement.

Dr. Thomas M. Gill, associate professor of internal medicine and geriatrics at the Yale School of Medicine and principal author of the study, looked at whether activities necessary for independent daily living – walking, bathing, using the toilet, grooming, dressing, getting up from a chair, and eating – improved with physical therapy. Results of his research showed that frail elderly individuals who followed a six-month physical therapy program and continued with exercises saw a 45 percent reduction in disability compared with others who did not participate.

Patients who received a program in physical therapy also had fewer fall-related injuries and were less likely to move into nursing homes. Dr. Gill concluded that “prehabilitation” or preventive physical therapy for the elderly could reduce health care expenses and nursing home admissions.

Helen Snyder is an example of how physical therapy can help a person function independently at home. Helen lives alone and suffers from fibromyalgia and arthritis. She falls periodically because of instability while on her feet. A physical therapist from the Visiting Nurse Association comes to Helen’s home twice a week to work on muscle strength and balance. One of many benefits for Helen from physical therapy is acquiring the ability to rise from a chair without assistance. The therapy has helped improve Helen’s range of mobility and her capacity to handle the tasks of daily living.

”Many elderly and their families often do not know that physical therapy can help an aged relative maintain independent living,” stated Nancy Crowe, director of rehabilitative services for the Visiting Nurse Association. “Seniors gain not only balance and strength, but also a renewed sense of confidence in their level of functioning, which

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results in a safer home environment,” she added.

Additional information about the benefits of physical therapy for the elderly can be obtained by contacting Nancy Crowe, director of rehabilitative therapies with the Visiting Nurse Association, at (214) 689-2224 or crowen@vnatexas.org.



Physical therapist Hortencia O'Connor works with VNA patient Helen Snyder twice a week to improve her muscle strength and balance.

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