



*Advocacy. Action. Answers on Aging.*

## Home and Community-Based Services for Older Adults: Nutrition and Wellness

**A**n essential component of an effective home and community-based system of services for older adults is the promotion of healthy aging through nutrition and physical activity programs. Current research shows that it is never too late to begin to make good eating and exercise choices for healthy aging. Good nutrition is essential to maintaining cognitive and physical functioning and plays an essential role in the prevention or management of many chronic diseases such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, diabetes, and osteoporosis. Research has also indicated that the substantial protective effect of physical activity persists even to advanced old age. In fact, some community-based wellness programs, which may feature exercise classes, chronic condition self-management classes, and personal health action plans, have resulted in a significant reduction of hospital use by older adults.

### Issue Background

#### **Nutrition**

**A**dequate nutrition is critical to healthy functioning and quality of life. Current nutrition programs and education have been the cornerstone of the Older Americans Act and aging network programs, improving the nutritional intake of older adults and decreasing social isolation. Available to seniors age 60 and older, these programs are targeted to those with the greatest social and economic need. But, while 3.2 million older Americans participate in senior meal programs each year, an estimated 4 million more older Americans suffer from food insecurity or the inability to afford, prepare or gain access to food.

The provision of nutrition services is especially important to ethnic minority older adults, who tend to have a higher incidence of chronic disease. Culturally appropriate meal programs are the entry point for improved nutrition and community engagement. For immigrant or

refugee groups who may have limited English language skills, senior nutrition programs help address cultural isolation, augment diet choices limited by fixed incomes, and bring needed services in a culturally supportive setting.

One program that has been of particular benefit to older adults who lack adequate nutrition is the Seniors Farmers Market Nutrition Pilot Program. The program awards grants to States, U.S. Territories and Indian tribal governments to provide coupons to low-income seniors for use at farmers markets, roadside stands, and community-supported agriculture programs. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 2001, fresh, nutritious, locally grown fruits, vegetables and herbs were available to 3,700 seniors at 929 farmers markets as well as 542 roadside stands and nearly 90 community supported agriculture programs through this important program.

#### **Physical Activity**

**W**hile social service providers offer some fitness programs for older adults, these programs need to be recognized as an essential partner to healthy aging and significantly expanded. Fitness programs offer older adults instruction on how to exercise safely and effectively, as well as information regarding access to convenient fitness programs. Researchers have found that exercise by older adults even in their mid-nineties can greatly increase overall muscle strength as well as bone density. Exercise can also improve an older adult's balance and ability to walk, resulting in maximum independence and a decreased incidence of falls.

#### **Wellness/Health Promotion**

**H**ealth promotion programs designed to meet the special needs of older adults can lead to improved behaviors and health status. Current health promotion and disease

prevention activities funded under the Older Americans Act include health risk assessments and screenings, nutrition screening and educational services, physical fitness, and health promotion programs on chronic disabling conditions.

The Medicare program has also made great strides in recognizing the importance of health promotion in healthy aging by covering preventive services, such as mammography, pap tests and other cancer screenings, bone mass measurements, diabetes monitoring and self-management, influenza immunizations, and pneumococcal vaccinations. In addition, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) is taking steps to actively promote Medicare clinical preventive services that contribute to a healthy aging experience. Under the Healthy Aging Project, CMS, in collaboration with other federal health agencies, is exploring Medicare's role in reducing behavioral risk factors, which account for 70% of the physical decline that occurs during aging. This project has focused on identifying interventions that increase Medicare-funded preventive services and promote behavioral change such as smoking cessation, proper diet and exercise among older adults.

### **Policy Recommendations**

**G**ood nutrition and daily activities that lead to overall wellness are integral components of an effective home and community-based service system for older adults as they play important roles in preventing or forestalling the onset of chronic conditions as well as reducing the effects of existing conditions. The benefits of, and need to expand, programs that promote sound nutrition and increased physical activity must be addressed at the federal, state and local level.

#### **n4a urges policymakers to:**

- **Expand and revitalize community senior nutrition programs to better meet the specialized nutrition needs of an increasingly ethnically diverse**

**population and individuals with multiple health conditions;**

- **Enhance resources to meet the increasing demand for home-delivered meals resulting from the growth of the 85 and older population which is expected to double by 2030;**
- **Support efforts to expand on the Seniors Farmers Market Nutrition Pilot Program by building on collaborative efforts between local service providers and farmers to improve access by older adults to healthy and nutritious foods;**
- **Promote and integrate support for physical activity throughout the aging network so that all older adults and aging network providers are aware of the health benefits of even moderate physical activity; and**
- **Advocate that public health funding be available for senior wellness programs, as well as Medicare preventive health coverage, to promote healthy aging and reduce future disease-related costs.**