

Geriatric Walking Clinic: Meeting Rural Veterans Where They Are

This model of care shows promise to increase rural Veterans' access to care and services, and is recommended for replication at other facilities.

Medical Issue

Regular physical activity is an essential component of healthy aging because it provides primary and secondary prevention of chronic diseases, disabling conditions and chronic disease risk factors.¹ In addition, adults who walk regularly experience an increased fitness level, decreased body weight, lower percentage of body fat and improved resting diastolic blood pressure.² Older adults who remain physically active as they age experience an increase in overall functional health, a lower risk of falling and improved cognitive health.³

Access Challenge

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that older adults participate in at least two and half hours of brisk walking each week.⁴ However, many older adults do not meet the recommended physical activity requirements. Several reasons are reported for limited physical activity among adults, including lack of motivation, safety concerns and no personal fulfillment from exercising.⁴

Solution

To increase physical activity in older Veterans, the Central Arkansas Health Care System established the Geriatric Walking Clinic, a home-based, self-paced exercise program that targets rural, elderly Veterans who have chronic conditions, a sedentary lifestyle, and a willingness to start walking regularly

for health promotion. Veterans are provided with a walking prescription tailored to their self-identified goals, perceived barriers, support system and physical condition. The program team empowers Veterans to set a personal walking goal using motivational counseling. In addition, the Geriatric Walking Clinic enrolls "Walking Buddies," who may be spouses, children or neighbors, who walk along with the Veteran; this can establish a support system to help the Veteran walk more and sustain the behavioral change.

Before starting, each Veteran is assessed by a program nurse to determine whether they can safely participate in the program. The Geriatric Walking Clinic also provides follow-up to Veterans through phone calls and uses various technological tools to motivate Veterans to achieve their personal goals and overcome setbacks. For Veterans enrolled in the Walking Clinic, a high percentage continue to be engaged in the program after two years. Of those Veterans who were surveyed, 79% strongly agreed that this program improved their motivation to walk on a regular basis.

The Geriatric Walking Clinic has supported more than 450 Veterans and their "walking buddies." The program team estimates that the program could result in health care savings of up to \$1.5 million per year for every 1,000 enrolled Veterans.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (nd). Promoting active lifestyles among older adults. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/pdf/lifestyles.pdf>

² Kassavou, A., Turner, A., & French, D.P. (2013). Do interventions to promote walking in groups increase physical activity? A meta-analysis. *The International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 10, 18. <http://doi.org/10.1186/1479-5868-10-18>

³ Tudor-Locke, C., Craig, C.L., Aoyagi, Y., Bell, R.C., Croteau, K.A., Bourdeaudhuij, I.D. . . . Blair, S.N. (2011). How many steps/day are enough? For older adults and special populations. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 8(80). doi:10.1186/1479-5868-8-80

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Physical activity. Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/older_adults/