U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Office of Rural Health
June 2025

ORH PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Gerofit

Background

Gerofit is an established, evidence-based exercise and health promotion program that targets older Veterans at risk for institutionalization due to physical limitations that are modifiable with exercise intervention. Program participants achieve significant improvements in functional measures, reduction in cardiovascular risk factors, and improved quality of life. Compared to non-adherers, long-term participants experienced a five-year delay of decline in physical performance and a 25% lower 10-year mortality rate. Gerofit has been successfully disseminated at 33 Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Health Administration (VHA) medical centers with special emphasis on reaching rural Veterans. Modes of delivery include live virtual streaming exercise classes to home or onsite facility-based exercise classes depending on location. The Gerofit program also offers an extensive on-demand exercise video library and home-based exercise telephone counseling.

> *"When I left the military at age 23, I was a 'lean, mean fighting machine'. Now I am 80 years old and like most others my age, I'm slower and lack the strength and stamina to do a lot of things. My last Gerofit assessment shows I've made a lot of progress. I'm now a 'Veteran in Action.'"*
>
> *Gerofit Participant, Salisbury, NC*

Goals and Objectives

The primary goal of the Gerofit program is to promote health and wellness to older Veterans using a functional exercise program that can be accessed by anyone, from anywhere, at any time. Maintaining independence is the most highly valued health outcome of older adults with chronic conditions yet multiple comorbidities, chronic pain and fear of exacerbating these conditions contribute to inactivity. Gerofit aims to change this.

1. Gerofit staff provide medically supervised, individually tailored exercise prescriptions for each participant in a warm, accepting, and fun group environment.
2. The group dynamics provide fellowship and comradery with peers, reducing the burden of isolation.
3. In addition to functional gains (e.g., improved mobility, decreased falls, improved strength) Gerofit participants have fewer ED visits, hospitalizations, and days in hospital. Gerofit participants have also seen a significant decline in certain classes of medications for diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, mental health and pain management.

Methodology

Veterans age 65+ in stable health and who are free from certain chronic conditions are referred by a VA provider. Gerofit staff call the Veteran after verifying eligibility to determine whether participation will be onsite or virtually. Veterans who do not have internet access and / or a smart device may be provided these through VA's Digital Divide program

Gerofit Virtual Class, Syracuse VA Healthcare System

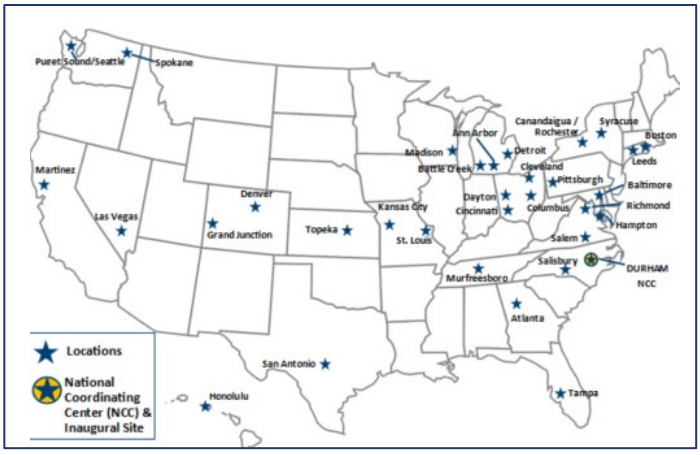
- Gerofit classes are offered at least three days a week for 60 minutes. Most virtual classes are scheduled for 75 minutes with the virtual room opening 10-15 minutes before class so that Veterans can socialize with each other. Classes are designed to address every level of fitness and modifications are made as needed.
- A functional assessment is conducted at enrollment to determine the Veteran's physical starting point. These results are explained to the Veteran and from these results and the Veteran's personal goals, a personalized exercise prescription is developed.
- In-person sessions are usually an open block of time. Veterans come at their designated time and are welcome to stay throughout the session. In addition to individual strength and cardio, on-site programs also provide group classes that focus on functional exercise, balance, and flexibility.
- Both in-person and virtual sessions focus on the core components of physical activity for older adults: aerobic endurance, strength building, flexibility, and balance.

Veterans who do not have a Gerofit program at their facility can email the Gerofit National Coordinating Center at VHADURGerofit2@va.gov. If eligible, they will be matched to a virtual program in their time zone or referred to the Gerofit on demand video library. With over 20 exercise videos to choose from, there is something for every level of fitness.

GEROFIT
VETERANS IN ACTION!

https://www.youtube.com/hashtag/gerofitexercise

- *There is no co-pay for Gerofit.*
- *On-demand videos are available 24/7 through Gerofit's exercise video library.*

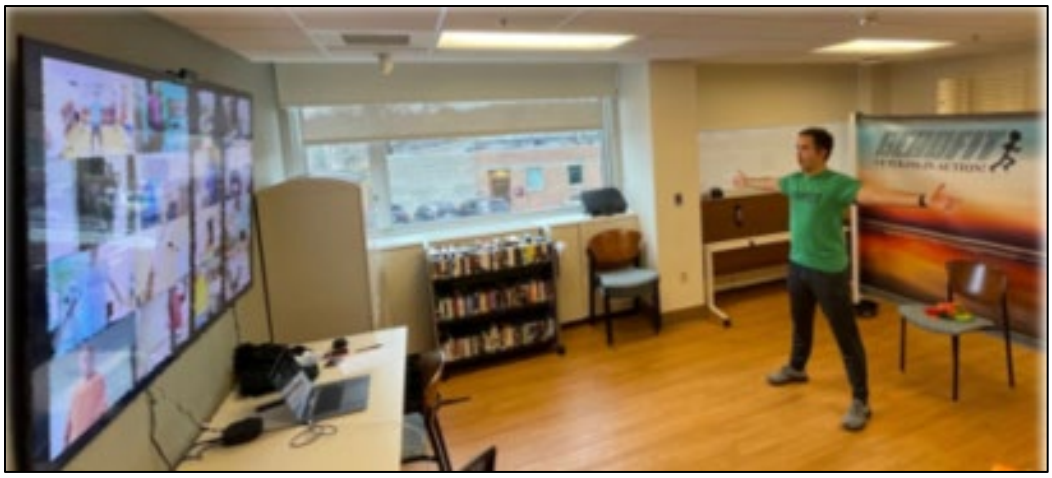


Gerofit locations nationwide.

Impact on Rural Veteran Health

Gerofit has been especially beneficially to rural Veterans who typically live too far away from an in-person program to participate with any regularity. Gerofit's virtual option allows rural Veterans to engage in robust exercise obtaining the same physical benefits as their in-person counterparts while building friendships and comradery in the virtual room.

- 58% of Veterans participate in Gerofit virtually. Most of these live in rural areas.
- Gerofit allows rural Veterans to participate from the comfort of their homes.
- There are currently over 3,000 Veterans actively participating in Gerofit.
- Over 6,000 Veterans were referred to Gerofit last year.
- 97% of Veterans participating in Gerofit said they are 'highly satisfied' with the program.



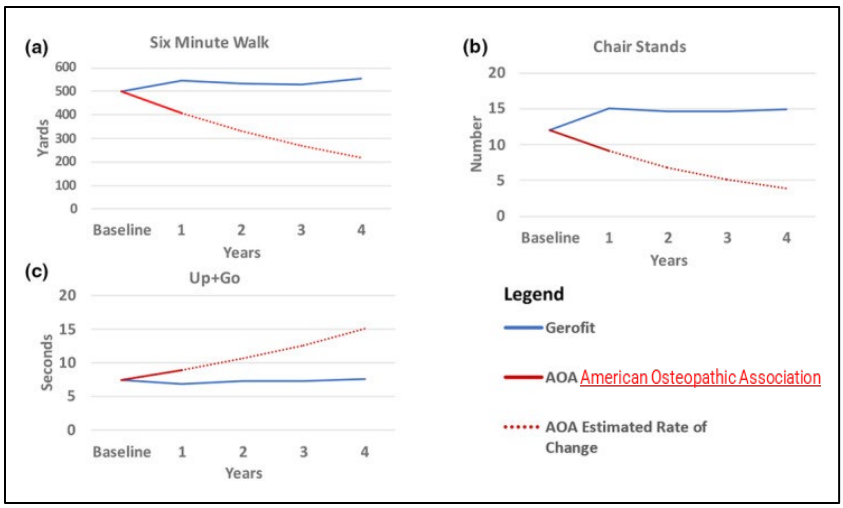
Gerofit Instructor, VA Health Care Center, Madison, WI

"I look forward to getting up early for Class on M, W, F helps get my day going. Helps keep my weight down, helps me stand up straight, helps my strength and I feel more agile and less likely to fall as my balance is a lot better. I just overall feel better about myself and gives me a fresh start to my day. I like the comradery with my fellow Gerofitters too." *~ Dayton Ohio Gerofit Participant*

Key Takeaways

Gerofit staff consist of exercise physiologists, physical and occupational therapists, and kinesiotherapists who have specialty training in geriatrics. Although largely group-based, individual attention is given to each Veteran in the creation of their unique exercise program. In addition to the physical benefits of exercise, Veterans benefit by being with their peers, which they report as being an important aspect of the program. There is no time limit on length of participation. Veterans are invited to participate as long as they are able.

Physical assessments are conducted at enrollment, 3-months, 6-months, 1 year and annually thereafter. Assessments are scored using standardized norms for gender and age. On average, Veterans enter Gerofit at a lower functional level than the average population. Gerofit participants have a dramatic increase in function initially, then experience a gradual decreased in function that is slower than the rate of the average population. Five years out, Gerofit participants remain at or above their baseline functional level.



The red line is the expected rate of decline over time in the absence of intervention.

The blue line is the average Gerofit participant's rate of rate of change over the same period.

Gerofit participants live healthier, longer.

References

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