

Physical activity a must for older people

Health professionals and researchers are joining forces to encourage older people in Counties Manukau to get physically active.

CMDHB Health of Older People programme manager Jenni Coles, says more than 40,000 people over the age of 65 years live in the region, with this number expected to rise 172% in the next 20 years.

“Many of our older people have chronic illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease and stroke. Physical activity can go a long way to improving their health and as a preventative measure, so we really want to encourage older people to keep as active as they can.”

Auckland University gerontology lecturer Dr Matthew Parsons agrees. “Society believes that as people get older they should slow down; but ageing is in fact a reason to keep being active, even at 70, 80 or 90 years of age.”

Dr Parsons has studied the far-reaching benefits that older people experience from physical activity, including improved strength, cardiovascular fitness and functional independence, as well as increased quality of life.

He says the nature of being physically active changes over time according to our ability. “In our younger years exercise can take many shapes and forms - running, team sports, swimming – the options are endless. At 70, we may get active by walking to the local shops whereas at 80 or 90, maintaining habitual activity levels by doing things like collecting the mail becomes increasingly important.”

Dr Parsons says the amount of activity needed differs for everyone and doesn't need to be exhausting. “When active you should just be able to speak comfortably out loud without getting out of breath,” he says. “For some frail older people, they may reach this point doing functional exercises like standing up from a sitting position, or by moving an object from one place to another – and that is fine.”

Dr Parsons says even if an older person isn't currently physically active, they can become so by setting small achievable goals and building on them once they are achieved.

One of the services funded by CMDHB to provide older people with support, exercise and other goals is Presbyterian Support Northern's Enliven Positive Ageing Services.

“The Enliven programme helps older people to stay in their homes longer and have more control of their lives, by offering support to do some tasks or assisting with rehabilitation to regain skills, mobility and confidence. This support to keep older people active and in their homes for longer is crucial and can be the difference between coping and not coping,” says Dr Parsons.

In Counties Manukau, health interactions for the older population are mainly with primary care providers such as GPs; however some need to be supported at times with care at hospital or specialist clinics.

CMDHB is currently in the process of implementing the Health of Older People Strategy which covers primary healthcare services, hospital and specialist services, needs assessment and service coordination, aged residential care, home-based and community-based support services like Enliven.

CMDHB Health of Older People programme manager Jenni Coles says Dr Parson's work shows physical activity can substantially reduce the risk of mortality and/or admissions to residential care.

"We will use his findings to continue our activities to improve health and fitness and support older people to remain in their own home."

To interview an older person who has benefited from improving their activity as a result of the Enliven programme, call Lauren Young and Associates on (09) 378 8433.