

Environment

A goal within reach

Seniors learn to prevent falls at Ashland Family YMCA's Don't Fall For Me event

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Adults were buzzing around a large room in the Ashland Family YMCA during Wednesday's Don't Fall For Me Symposium. It wasn't a speed-dating session, but a program devised to test senior citizens' ability to prevent taking a spill.

With measuring tapes, stopwatches and clipboards, student nurses recorded the Ashland seniors' balance, flexibility and endurance at six testing stations.

People born during the Jazz Age were marching, squatting and stretching to touch their toes. They displayed their strength, aerobic stamina and agility. In between, they chatted.

Eleanor Savage, 73, sat on the edge of a chair and easily reached her arms beyond her outstretched leg. After Savage, wearing a sweatshirt with a Nairobi safari logo, sat back again, she was told by a nurse equipped with a ruler that her reach extended beyond her toes — by 3 1/2 inches.

Savage later learned that her flexibility was great for her age and, really, any age. This surprised her, since she had fallen while jogging in downtown Ashland in January 2010. She underwent two surgeries and six months of physical therapy to get motion back in her broken wrist.

On this day, she held up her left hand to demonstrate that once she could barely bend her fingers. Now? She curled her fingers into a tight little fist and smiled.

Falls are serious, sometimes life-threatening, to older adults. People older than 65 who break a hip are more likely to lose their independence or die within a few months, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Symposium speaker Sharon Johnson, who writes the Mail Tribune's "Healthy Aging" column, said falls amount to \$30 billion a year in medical cost. "We could help with the fiscal cliff by not falling," she jokingly told the crowd.

Oregon Health & Science University School of Nursing students Emily Brown, Kea Gharagouzloo and Jasmine Smith organized the program, and created a pamphlet to remind seniors that they can prevent falls and fractures by staying physically fit, fixing potential safety hazards at home, and understanding medications that may cause dizziness or sleepiness.

Despite the free program's serious intention, the people going through the testing circuit were making light of their ability.

At the chair-stand station, Carol Sobotka, 69, stood up and down 13 times without the aid of her hands. She left happy with her results and the assessment of her lower-body strength, but she pretended to complain about the 30-second time frame.

"It seems longer when you're being tortured," joked volunteer Gerry Cavanaugh, 82.

Nearby, Veronica Sparkes, 70, was doing arm curls with a dumbbell to test her upper-body strength, and Carol Custodio, 69, ran a 5.83-second race around an orange cone set 8 feet in front of her to assess her agility and dynamic balance.

Nurse Tamar Salomon was giving a "back scratch test," measuring the gaps between fingers when the seniors tried to clasp one hand over one shoulder with one behind their back to determine their upper-body flexibility.

"A few hands overlapped by 3 or more inches," Salomon reported. "But many people told me previous injuries prevented them from getting their hands to touch."

Nurse Cameron McGuire was counting how many times the seniors could raise their knees in a march over 2 minutes to determine their aerobic endurance. "They were getting competitive with each other," he said.

"You were really moving," McGuire told Dick Corrigan, 79, who seemed happy with his 107 steps. The highest number was 112.

Corrigan later said that he keeps fit by scaling Mount McLoughlin and taking 50-mile coast walks with a 65-year-old friend Corrigan refers to as "a younger hiking buddy."

There was a long line to be weighed and plenty of excuses: "I like to eat," confessed one 69-year-old woman looking glumly at the reading. Corrigan took his Greek fisherman's cap and sweatshirt off before he stepped on the scale.

After testing, the seniors received time with the student nurses and OHSU faculty to go over their results, be compared to others their age, and work up an action plan and activity log. If the seniors want, the nurse volunteers will call them in a few weeks to hear about their progress and retest them in the spring.

Kumud Gokani, 70, said the Health Fair in Medford she attended two years ago proved to be a "trigger point."

"I was shocked that I couldn't stand on just one foot," said Gokani, who now exercises every day to improve her balance. "This program is a beautiful way to encourage people to stay fit and a good reminder to keep ourselves flexible."

The seniors were also encouraged to find a workout buddy. At the bottom of one of the handouts, there was space to jot down a phone number. Maybe it wasn't that different from speed dating after all.

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Avoiding falls

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services offers this advice for avoiding falls:

- Have handrails and plenty of light in all stairways
- Wear shoes with nonslip soles that give good support
- Don't use step stools; keep items within easy reach
- Maintain a clear walking path
- Remove small rugs
- Move phone and electrical cords from walkways and open areas
- Use bright lights in all walking areas
- Be aware that some medications can make you dizzy or sleepy
- Have your vision checked