

Fit Older Adults Live Longer

America's seniors who get a regular dose of physical activity live longer than unfit adults, regardless of their body fat, according to researchers at the University of South Carolina's Arnold School of Public Health. Over the course of the 12-year Aerobics Center Longitudinal Study at the Cooper Clinic in Dallas, Texas, researchers found that adults over age 60 who died were older, had lower fitness levels, were fatter and had more cardiovascular risk factors than survivors. The study's findings are published in the Dec. 5 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

The study, conducted between 1979 and 2001, is the first to examine the link among fitness, body fat and death in older Americans. "Fitness level is a strong predictor for risk of dying in older adults," said Dr. Steven N. Blair, an Arnold School professor and one of the study's authors. Fit men and women who were overweight or obese had a lower risk for death than did those who were of normal weight but had low fitness levels, he said. The least fit 20 percent of the 2,603 people in the study had a death rate four times higher than the 20 percent who were the fittest. In fact, the least fit 20 percent were twice as likely to die as the next 20 percent in the fitness distribution.

The study is important because America's aging population, obesity and physical inactivity are significant public-health challenges, Blair said. "By 2030, approximately 70 million people will be older than 65," Blair said. "Already we know that nearly one-third of Americans are obese, and the majority of adults do not get enough physical activity." Medical expenditures associated with inactivity and obesity are greatest among older adults, he said. "This represents a significant economic burden to society by an aging population that is inactive and obese," Blair said. The researchers assessed fitness by a treadmill test, and fatness was measured by body mass index (BMI), waist circumference and percent body fat.

Being physically active doesn't mean that older adults have to head to the gym or make dramatic changes to their lives. Walking at a moderate pace for 30 minutes a day on at least five days a week is one way to achieve fitness, and many communities have walking and fitness programs at malls, churches and health centers. Other activities may include gardening, playing with grandchildren, swimming, taking water aerobics classes or playing golf. "It is possible for many older Americans to improve their fitness," Blair said. "The good news from this study is that they don't have to be thin to benefit from being physically active."

The study isn't giving Americans permission to throw caution to the wind and eat whatever foods they want. "But people can say, 'I may not be as thin as I was, but I can still be healthy because I'm being active and have a balanced diet,'" he said. "Enhancing physical capacity should allow older adults to achieve a healthy lifestyle and enjoy a longer life in better health."

Other Carolina researchers involved in the study were Dr. Mei Sui, a researcher at the Arnold School and the study's lead author, Dr. James Laditka, Dr. James W. Hardin, Dr. Steven P. Hooker and Nancy Chase.

The above is intended as general information only. Be sure to contact your physician for advice or your own specific medical problems. Have a question? Write to Questions from the Field, Gananda-Walworth Physical Therapy and Village Fitness, 1218 Mayberry Place, Macedon, NY 14502, or send e-mail to gwpt@rochester.rr.com.

