

Thursday 1 February 2018

Physical Activity Boosts Strength and Reduces Falls for Older Adults

Earlier this week, the Federal Minister for Ageing, the Hon. Ken Wyatt AM, MP, [released a statement](#) on the impressive results of a two-year, \$1.4 million government funded study for older adults with aged care needs.

The progressive resistance and balance training (PRBT) study, *Muscling Up Against Disability* (MUAD), was supervised and delivered by Accredited Exercise Physiologists (AEPs).

Exercise & Sports Science Australia (ESSA) is pleased to see the Federal Government recognising the crucial role structured physical exercise and building strength plays in improving the health, independence and quality of life of older Australians.

“Many chronic, age associated physical and cognitive declines can be delayed by participation in regular exercise. ESSA is calling for physical activity and exercise to be included as a routine part of aged care and health services, and the results of the PRBT study significantly highlight these benefits,” says Alex Lawrence, ESSA Policy and Advocacy Officer.

On average, the program participants registered a:

- 33% improvement in leg strength
- 13% increase in overall physical performance
- 23% drop in the risk of sarcopenia (muscle wastage)
- 7% reduction in frailty
- Significant reduction in falls
- Reduction in depression and anxiety.

“The benefits of the study were well received by participants, with more than 80% of them continuing to train after the study period ended, even though they had to self-fund their participation. In addition to the significant physical and cognitive benefits, participants positively reported reduced pain, improved energy and how much more competent they felt in and away from the home,” explains Dr Timothy Henwood, lead researcher for the Muscling Up Against Disability study.

“On the back of this evidence, we hope the Federal Government will support a national dissemination of the program so all older adults with aged care needs can experience these benefits.”

Dr Henwood also notes that, “Exercise for older adults living in the community with aged care needs is common, yet we still see individuals experience increasing disability.”

“This suggests the exercise being delivered is not evidence based or those delivering it don’t possess the knowledge to support positive change. In the MUAD study, the use of university trained AEPs, aware of the value of progressive training, helped drive the significant study benefits.”

The [ESSA for an Active Nation](#) campaign is calling for a systematic change in how we value and prioritise best-practice exercise services. Every person should be able to experience the physical, mental and social health benefits of living an active life.

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The need for the Federal Government to drive sector change is substantial, with a 2008 [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare study](#) suggesting that total health and residential aged care expenditure will increase by 189%, from \$85 billion to \$246 billion (an increase of \$161 billion), in the period 2003 to 2033.

“The medical cost alone of falls will reach \$1.4 billion by 2051, and a capital investment of \$33 billion will be needed by the next decade to meet the accelerated demand for residential aged care beds,” adds Mr Lawrence.

So what is the solution?

Dr Henwood indicates that we need to see an increased number of older Australians accessing evidence based lifestyle services, such as exercise and diet, and for this to become a normal and prioritised component of individuals’ care models.

“While this is a broader education need for the individual, the aged care sector and the aged care assessment teams, it will have positive implications for independence and health in the long-term.”

“And we shouldn’t stop at older adults living on their own in the community, with evidence equally strong that those in residential aged care facilities can have significant physical and cognitive benefits from exercise. However, for these benefits to transpire, the Aged Care Funding Instrument (ACFI) needs to recognise exercise physiology as a supported service type and exercise as a valuable therapy.”

Although national guidelines for physical activity are relevant for people of all ages, exercise frequency, modalities and intensities should be tailored to the individual by an exercise professional, such as an accredited exercise physiologist.

For more information on ESSA’s advocacy to improve aged care services, please visit the [ESSA for an Active Nation website](#).

To contact your local accredited exercise physiologist, you can visit the [ESSA website](#).

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