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Majority of middle age and older adults know diet & exercise are part of healthy life but majority lack skills

(College Station, TX. May 6, 2005). The good news is a recent telephone survey of the American Public Health Association found that 78% of America's age 55 and older population understand that diet and exercise are important to maintaining good health. The bad news is that, despite this knowledge, almost 64% of adults age 65 and older do not meet the Surgeon General's recommendations for 30 minutes of moderate physical activity most days of the week.

“What this means,” says Marcia G. Ory, Ph.D., director of the *Active for Life*[®] National Program Office at The Texas A&M University System Health Science Center School of Rural Public Health, “is that about two-thirds of older Americans are not getting enough physical activity and are putting themselves at increased risk of chronic illness, disability, and loss of independence because they are sedentary.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the agency that collects lifestyle data as part of the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, notes that Americans can increase their number of healthy years simply by adopting a healthy lifestyle. Research shows that many of the symptoms of deterioration that come with age are a matter of mindset and environment - not genetics. People who are physically active, eat a healthy diet, avoid tobacco products, practice other healthy behaviors, and live in activity-friendly environments reduce their risk of chronic diseases and have half the rate of disability of those who do not.

For those concerned about rising healthcare costs, Ory points out that preventing health problems is one of the few known ways to stem rising healthcare costs. “We know that the benefits of regular physical activity are considerable. Physical activity helps to control weight; contributes to healthy bones, muscles, and joints; reduces falls among the elderly; decreases symptoms of anxiety and depression; and can lessen the need for hospitalizations, physician visits and medications. For the aging population, physical activity can help people maintain independent living and enhance their overall quality of life. Research has shown that even among frail and very old adults physical activity can improve mobility and functioning.”

The *Active for Life*[®] program, funded by a grant from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation[®], is working with nine community-based organizations in twelve communities nationwide to test programs designed to help seniors get and stay moving. “The programs are not exercise classes,” says Ory. “They are programs designed to help people make changes in their health behavior by learning some common sense measures such as goal setting, recognizing and dealing with barriers, and finding a physical activity they enjoy.”

Active for Life[®] is also involved in research to better understand how to develop and deliver health messages to older adults. “Our research tells us that the majority of older adults know that physical activity is important to their health. What we are trying to understand is how to develop messages that motivate individuals from knowing and thinking about being active to actually becoming active.”

“We have already begun to understand that there are multiple issues that need to be considered when working with older adults through community programs. The most important is that one size does not fit all,” says Ory. “Older people are no different from other age groups in that they are diverse in what they like to do and how they like to do things. For some, a structured exercise class is important and the socialization of that class is critical. Many people are motivated by seeing their friends and visiting before or after the class. For other people, exercise as a solitary activity provides relaxation and time to think and to meditate.”

“We have found that walking is by far the activity of choice and this makes a lot of sense. Most people can begin a walking program. Even older adults who need the assistance of walkers or canes are often able to make tremendous progress if they start slowly and stick with it,” says Diane Dowdy, Ph.D., deputy director of the program.

“We applaud elite senior athletes – everyone is motivated by seeing a sixty or seventy year old complete a marathon or a century bicycle ride,” says Dowdy. “However, we get even more excited to hear about benefits individuals have realized such as one elderly woman who needed oxygen to walk from the living room to the kitchen. But now, after participating in *Active for Life*[®], she can engage in routine daily tasks without reliance on an oxygen tank. Engaging in a non-strenuous physical activity program can often make the difference between an elder remaining independent and needing assisted care living arrangements.”

This May, as Older Americans Month is celebrated, the *Active for Life*[®] program recognizes the theme of "Celebrate Long-Term Living" as a way to honor older Americans as a national treasure and to highlight the need for mid-life and older persons to be prepared to live longer than previous generations. Older adults and baby boomers need to make thoughtful choices now so they will be more likely to remain healthy, productive, and financially secure in their later lives.

The Texas A&M University System Health Science Center School of Rural Public Health is the first school of public health to focus on the often-unique health issues and needs of rural populations. The Texas A&M University System Health Science Center provides the state with health education, outreach and research. Its five components located in communities throughout Texas are Baylor College of Dentistry, the College of Medicine, the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, the Institute of Biosciences and Technology and the School of Rural Public Health.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, based in Princeton, N.J., is the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and health care. It concentrates its grantmaking in four goal areas: to assure that all Americans have access to quality health care at reasonable cost; to improve the quality of care and support for people with chronic health conditions; to promote healthy communities and lifestyles; and to reduce the personal, social and economic harm caused by substance abuse – tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs.