

Georgians Growing Older, Fatter



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Diabetes is the seventh leading cause of death in Georgia – equivalent to five deaths a day.

There are pretty phrases or nice words to dress it up, but the bare fact is Georgians are getting older and fatter. And both problems are costing local and state governments big dollars and many Georgians their livelihoods and their lives. Today, senior adults make up 9 percent of Georgia's population, and that number is expected to double by 2030. "Our growing, aging population will have specific needs that we are preparing to meet," said Jorge Atiles, associate dean for outreach and extension of the University of Georgia (UGA) College of Family and Consumer Sciences. "UGA Cooperative Extension is putting more research and resources into geriatric services that will educate seniors on living healthier, more productive lives."

As more seniors remain active and independent, issues like safety, nutrition, quality of life, housing safety, injury prevention, consumer fraud prevention and chronic disease management have become critical. Maintaining good health and independence is a major concern for most seniors.



DeKalb County Extension Coordinator Jessica Hill teaches a class on proper nutrition, for a diabetes support group.

Studies show many health problems plaguing seniors are preventable. "Poor nutrition in seniors can prolong recovery from illnesses, increase costs and incidence of institutionalization and lead to a poorer quality of life," said Connie Crawley, a UGA Extension health and nutrition expert. "Good nutrition, on the other hand, can help lessen the effects of diseases including osteoporosis, obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, certain cancers and gastrointestinal problems." Yet, the 2006 Behavior Risk Factor Surveillance Survey showed that 72.3 percent of adults between ages 55 and 64, and 59.3 percent of adults older than age 65, are obese or overweight. And 60 percent of senior adults are inactive, Crawley said. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), physical activity can prevent, delay or control many of the chronic diseases that plague older adults.

Local UGA Extension agents are working in their communities to improve these statistics. In Stewart County, 30 percent of seniors live below poverty level and 26 percent have less than a ninth grade education. "Information that leads to better health and nutrition is vitally important for this population group," said Stewart County FACS Extension agent Sandra Gay. To help more than 180 local seniors get needed information, Gay held monthly educational programs and activities for senior citizens. "They learned about nutrients, fat, salt and sugar reduction, food safety, supplements, diabetes, disaster preparedness, increasing the power of their food dollars and the importance of physical activity," she said.

Seniors in Telfair County faced other obstacles like limited transportation and health care options.

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