

# More Seniors Stay Fit by Moving to a "Don't Grow Old Program"

By Melena Z. Ryzik / New York Times News Service  
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Glenn Ferris never exercised. He didn't need to. As a telephone installer and repairman, he kept active, climbing telephone poles and shimmying under houses to rig wires. When he retired at 52, he cut lawns and clipped hedges for neighbors in Pasadena, Calif. But as the years passed, Ferris, now 78, slowed down. He began to fear, as he put it, "the rocking chair coming to get me."

So when his insurance company sent him a letter in March 2004, offering to cover gym memberships for him and his wife, Mary, he didn't hesitate. Soon after, the two of them toured a local gym and signed up.

At the time, he said, joining a gym "was the furthest thing from my mind." But now he attends religiously, doing what he calls his "don't grow old program," a hodgepodge of weight lifting, marching in place and balancing drills on a stability ball. He began eating healthier and lost 15 pounds.

Ferris is one of a growing number of older Americans who are discovering the benefits of exercise. Since at least 1996, when the surgeon general released a report saying that "no one is too old to enjoy the benefits of regular physical activity," there has been an increased public awareness that fitness and growing old are not mutually exclusive. Studies have shown that exercise can help maintain both physical and mental health among older people. (The latest research suggests that it reduces pain and even generates brain cells.) And more people -- from doctors and insurers to nursing home administrators and residents -- are paying attention.

"Every time you pick up a magazine or a newspaper, you'll see articles that say, eat right, don't smoke and exercise," said Paul Cohen, 76, a retiree who suspects that his regular workouts have helped him avert another bypass. "People are taking that advice more and more."

To meet the demands of the increasing number of older exercisers, a cottage industry of retiree-oriented fitness programs has emerged, from expensive European walking tours to specialized personal training. Americans older than 55 are the fastest growing segment of gym members, according to American Sports Data, a market research firm. And franchises that blare oldies and ban spandex are also growing in popularity.

Just as Curves has attracted inactive women to their clubs, gyms for an older clientele often draw people who were previously sedentary. More and more, it is not just lifelong gym-goers who exercise late in life. A new crop of older Americans have traded their slippers for sneakers.

When SilverSneakers, a benefits program that sets up exercise plans for insurers (including the Ferris'), started in 1996, it had 28,000 Medicare-eligible members nationwide, said Leigh J. Berg, the manager of corporate communications for the HealthCare Dimensions, which runs SilverSneakers. By 2000 there were 500,000 members. Today there are 1.8 million members in 40 health plans who have joined 1,300 health clubs nationwide.

"The providers are seeing this as a way to prevent more intensive needs for seniors," said Robyn Stone, the executive director of the Institute for the Future of Aging Services, a nonprofit group in Washington. So it is a way for insurers to save money. But Stone noted: "It's also a demand from the elders themselves. They want it."

**John Rude, a gerontologist from Eugene, Ore., and the president of Age Dynamics, a consulting company that designs and develops wellness programs for older people, said: "There's a huge investment in this business. Ten years ago, if I went into a retirement community to look for space for a program, I'd be lucky to get 500 or 1,000 square feet. I've now got several clients that are developing 10,000 to 25,000 square feet."**

Even existing programs are growing. Take the one at the Hebrew Home for the Aged in the Bronx, New York City. Fifteen years ago the fitness center was 250 square feet, said Dan Reingold, the president of the home. The newest version, which is 1,500 square feet and includes a pool, opened last month, and is used by half of its 900 residents.

There have always been people who exercised well into their twilight years, but those swelling the membership rolls of gyms today are not only extraordinary Jack LaLanne types. There are reluctant exercisers like Ferris and people like Rosalyn Auerbach, who has a degenerative muscle disorder and uses a motorized chair to get around. Auerbach, 76, a resident at the Hebrew Home, makes it a priority to attend a variety of fitness classes, from Jazzercise to weight training, each week.

"By doing the exercise I feel like I'm accomplishing something," Auerbach said.

For many, the appeal of fitness is equal parts mental, social and physical. "The people who are working out the most are the most active in other activities," said Reingold of the Hebrew Home. "And when you're 85, being busy is a wonderful thing."

Elwina Weck, 80, was attracted to the camaraderie at Fit After Fifty, an express gym for the AARP set, a few months ago. "We have four or five people in the group and we kid around," said Weck, a retired clerical worker in Dunedin, Fla.

Older Americans are drawn to fitness for a variety of reasons. Some want fewer doctor visits or to be able to socialize. Others want to like what they see in the mirror. But many older exercisers also worry about injuries and don't want to get exhausted. "No pain, no gain," is not an appealing mentality, said Hank Linett, 85, a personal trainer and an owner of Healthplex, a gym in Clifton Park, N.Y. After four decades in the business, he created a moderate program to attract the growing number of older people who popped in for a tour.

More than a third of his gym's members are of retirement age, more than at most traditional fitness centers, places that some older customers find intimidating.

"They're not ready to compete or compare themselves to people who are much younger or much thinner," said Marcia G. Ory, a professor of social and behavioral health at Texas A&M University and the director of a program called Active for Life, which promotes elderly fitness. That may explain why gyms exclusively for older clientele are growing in popularity. Fit After Fifty, which started in Florida in 2003 with only a handful of franchises, expects to open 100 more next year.

Even the architecture of nursing homes may change as fitness becomes more important to residents. A recent study by the Georgia Institute of Technology found that exercise spaces that are visible to passers-by attract more gym-goers. Based on the study, Stone of the Institute for the Future of Aging Services at the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging is writing guidelines for nursing homes looking to attract active residents.

Some people envision old age as a time of increasing frailty. A study done by the University of California, Los Angeles, and reported in the October issue of the Journal of General Internal Medicine, found that older people with the lowest expectations were the most likely to be sedentary.

"Now people are living longer, they want to take care of themselves a little more," Weck said. "There's still a bit of independence in all us old folks."