

Seniors can reduce disability through exercise, study finds

Ten minutes of daily 'prehabilitation' may forestall nursing-home admission

BY KRISTA FOSS

Aging, frail Canadians fighting to maintain their independence may take heart from a new study that says about 10 minutes worth of low-intensity exercise daily will nearly halve the disabilities they would otherwise experience.

While there has been a crush of new evidence touting the benefits of exercise for the rapidly aging population, research published in today's issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine* is one of the few studies to look at the benefits of increased activity for physically tenuous seniors in their own homes.

Thomas Gill, an associate professor of medicine at Yale University, calls it "prehabilitation." He and his colleagues studied the effects of regular balance exercises and muscle training on a group of 188 people aged 75 and older, still living at home and experiencing some level of disability in moving around, dressing or feeding themselves.

Half of the group was trained to

do a daily program — 10 to 15 minutes of exercises such as leg lifts using resistance elastics and balancing on each leg — while the other half was given information on preventive health measures and nutrition, but nothing more.

After seven months, the group on the exercise regimen had 45 per cent less disability than the control group, according to a disability scale based on eight regular activities including bathing, grooming and using a toilet.

There was also a difference in the number of serious falls resulting in fractures.

One person in the exercise group fractured a hand, while six people in the control group suffered hip, shoulder or tailbone fractures.

"A fracture of the hip in this age group at this level of disability is the beginning of the end," Dr. Gill said yesterday.

"The results of our study provide hope to older individuals that functional decline and disability can be prevented."

The results don't surprise other

experts who study the benefits of physical activity for seniors.

Tom Hickey is a professor of health behaviour and health education at the University of Michigan who has spent the past decade researching the effects of exercise on seniors who are frail or obese. His studies show that even a slight increase in activity can significantly lower blood pressure.

Prof. Hickey became convinced that exercise programs could forestall permanent admissions to nursing homes for some seniors.

"It was clear the potential savings [to the health-care system] were very high," he said yesterday.

Dr. Gill said the participants in the exercise group were encouraged by regular visits from a physical therapist, which amounted to more than \$3,000 a person during the seven-month study period.

Ryan Rhodes, an assistant professor of physical education at the University of Victoria, said he has no problem getting seniors to join an experimental exercise group, because it means getting out and meeting people. But ensuring that seniors stick to regular exercise on their own is another matter.

"The Canadian statistics still show that 60 per cent of older adults are inactive," he said.