

Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.

Healthy aging

by Carlos T. Carter, President & CEO, Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh

Why is promoting healthy aging so important for our Black/African American elders?

Promoting healthy aging is important because we want Black people to age gracefully and live their best lives in re-

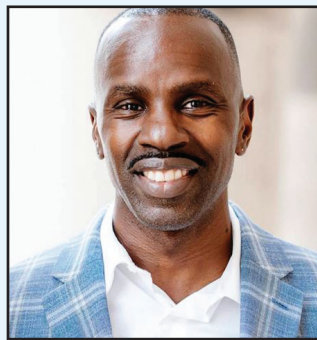
irement. The reality is when you are not healthy your quality of life is compromised, and your lifespan is at risk of being shortened. Unfortunately, Blacks and other marginalized communities face more health issues resulting from lack of exercise and lack of access to healthy foods. As a result, obesity is a major issue for many Americans, but it is worse for Black

Americans due to poor diet choices and high caloric intake. This underscores the importance for better access to good foods and for people to make better diet choices when there are options.

Community health workers help to build trust and make achieving these changes in our lifestyle doable. What ideas do we have for increasing this kind of intervention in our Black/African American communities?

Education and access are critical. We need to increase engagement

with Black communities through increased partnerships with barbershops, hair salons, churches, senior pro-



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grams, individual families, and anywhere that Black people live, work and play. We need to stress the importance of healthy eating and the importance of staying mobile through walking and other exercise. I recommend that we find innovative and ongoing ways to better educate people about exactly what is healthy eating as people have different interpretations of what healthy eating is.

How can we further disseminate this information about how to achieve

healthy aging?

We should leverage media like television, internet and others. It's critical to start educating younger children who will one day become the older generation. This will position Black people and other marginalized communities to have the information necessary to make better choices. It is also important for Blacks to have access to healthy foods in their communities. This will further empower them to be able to make good choices in their day-to-day lives.



Small, easy weight loss can smooth path to healthy aging

by Dr. Steven M. Albert, PhD, MS

Healthy aging is a goal for most of us. Unfortunately, many things get in the way of that goal. Some things are beyond our control (like genetics), but some things (like making healthy lifestyle changes) are well within our reach. Best of all, we can do these things no matter where we are on our life journey.

Powerful legs and healthy aging

Researchers at the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Aging and Population Health (CAPH) have found that an older adult's legs (balance, walking speed, and ability to rise from sitting) can help that person avoid hospitalization and age well at home.

It turns out how well we move our legs is important for normal aging. That process includes an older person's ability to climb stairs, for example, handle a rough sidewalk, or chase after a grandchild without injury.

Weight and walking speed

From other studies, we know that the more older adults weigh, the slower they walk. So, one way to increase walking or "gait"

speed is to lose a few pounds, especially if your BMI puts you in the overweight or obese categories.

In the Black community, this is especially important. According to the CDC1, non-Hispanic Blacks were 1.3 times more likely to be obese than non-Hispanic Whites. That percentage increases for Black females who are 2.3 times more likely to be overweight than their White counterparts.

Sadly, that extra weight means they're more likely to have high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol. These things put them at risk for heart disease and stroke — especially as they age.

MOVE UP

With that in mind, CAPH researchers designed a weight management intervention called MOVE UP. The study included about 300 older adults (age 60 to 75). All were overweight or obese.

For a year, participants attended one-hour meetings in small groups in 26 community sites in Pittsburgh (senior centers, churches, libraries).

Most participants were female, and a quarter identified as racial minorities. The group's most common ailments were arthritis and high blood pressure.

Every participant had to have their regular doctor approve doing MOVE UP.

A supportive coach

One of the most important features of each MOVE UP group was its leader. In this case, it was a Community Health Worker (CHW) who was connected to the neighborhood in some way and was kind, knowledgeable, and enthusiastic.

CHWs helped their participants learn about healthy food and nutrition. They encouraged everyone to be a little more physically active and slowly lose about 5% of their weight (10-12 pounds).

MOVE UP research staff collected data four times during the program. They measured standing balance, gait speed, and the time it took to complete five chair stands.

Small changes = big results

The researchers noted that tiny changes in loss of movement can affect an older adult's independence and risk for dying early.

The MOVE UP study showed that people who lost a small amount of weight walked faster. That small gain in speed gave the individual a better chance of doing everyday activities and staying out of the hospital.



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What helped people lose weight?

Weight loss methods were simple: participants were motivated to eat more mindfully and engage in low-intensity exercise.

MOVE UP participants who lost 10-12 pounds did so without radical exercise or diets. Instead, with help from CHWs, participants learned about calorie control, nutrition, physical activity, exercise, and safety (see graphic).

For example, participants compared info on food labels like canned soups and spaghetti sauce. They paid attention to fat, salt, protein content and calorie count. They were encouraged to eat 30% fewer calories from fat,

while getting plenty of protein. They wrote down weekly food and activity in "Lifestyle Logs." They learned what a healthy food portion looks like, and how to recognize and stop overeating.

Likewise, exercise was low-key, but consistent. The recommended time for physical activity, such as brisk walking, was initially just 10 minutes a day, five days a week, with a gradual increase to 35 minutes per day.

Participants also addressed how confident they were to exercise when they're tired, in a bad mood, alone, or in other difficult situations that make physical activity challenging.

Food & exercise inequities

The term "health equity" means everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be healthy.

We know from health equity studies2 that in black communities, eating healthy and exercising can be a challenge compared to other communities. Easy access to fresh, seasonal foods may not exist and if they do, the items may be more expensive than processed foods (fresh green beans vs canned, for example).

The same may be true

for exercise. Is there a safe place in the neighborhood to exercise outside when weather permits (do side-walks exist and are they in good shape, for instance)? If weather is bad, is there somewhere to exercise inside, like a community center or high school gym?

Owning your health

One of the big takeaways from MOVE UP is that small, do-able lifestyle changes are worthwhile for all older adults. Comparing food labels and choosing the healthier option can make a difference in your health. So can spending just a small amount of time walking or doing other easy movements in your home or in your neighborhood.

By choosing to work with your PCP to lose weight slowly through a low-key diet/nutrition and exercise program, your actions will help you increase your chances of staying healthy as you age — but only if you take charge.

To learn more about healthy aging and take advantage of all the program and services that are available to older Pittsburghers, please reach out to us! Visit Pitt's Center for Aging and Population Health at <https://www.caph.pitt.edu/>.

It's Never Too Late to Start!

Regular physical activity is an important component in healthy aging. Physical activity can improve the condition of certain diseases and, in some cases, even prevent them. Anyone at any age can do some type of activity to improve his or her health. Always check with your PCP before you start a new physical activity routine.

Why Should You Be Active?

- Helps you live independently — and manage stress.
 - Strengthens your muscles & improves endurance
 - Improves balance, coordination, and flexibility
 - Increases heart & lung strength
 - Boosts immune function
 - Reduces blood pressure
 - Helps you sleep
 - Increases your energy level
- Exercise Safely
- Increase your activity level slowly, especially if you haven't been active in a while.



- Warm up before and cool down after you're physically active.

- Drink plenty of fluids no matter what time of year it is.

- In the winter, be active during the warmest part of the day and dress in layers. In the summer, wear light clothing and be active during the coolest times of day. An umbrella can be useful in winter as a walking stick and in summer to shade your body. Hats and sunscreen are good in all seasons. If weather quality outside is poor, be active indoors.

- Wear appropriate shoes. It's better to spend a little more on athletic shoes than to pay a doctor for foot problems.

- Carry ID and a cell phone with you in case you need help when you're exercising alone.

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