



## Helping Senior Living Residents Avoid Unhealthy Weight Gain

In July 2019, experts from West Virginia University noted that today, about 30% of senior care community residents are living with obesity. This complicates their care, and compromises their health. Some skilled nursing facilities are adapting their buildings with widened doorways and specialized equipment. But of course, the main focus is on the health of residents. So today, there is increased emphasis on helping residents maintain a healthy weight.

Not so long ago, when people thought of seniors and weight problems, they were thinking of the problem of being underweight. It is true that being significantly underweight is a red flag for possible health problems in the elderly. But geriatrics specialists say that today, a greater percentage of the senior population is dealing with the opposite health challenge.

University of New Hampshire kinesiology professor Dain LaRoche reported that the common image of a “bird-thin” elder being at the highest risk of disability might not be accurate. LaRoche said, “That’s the chorus that’s been sung for the last 20 years. But with two-thirds of Americans overweight or obese and the elderly population expected to double by the year 2030, we are going to see a large portion of people who are disabled due to the concurrent gaining of weight and loss of strength.”

Most of us are aware of our nation’s obesity epidemic. Health educators have done a good job of publicizing the connection between obesity and health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and stroke. Many studies have also shown that excess body fat raises the risk of cancer, osteoporosis, dementia,



arthritis, hearing loss and depression. For this reason, senior care communities—once primarily focused on helping residents maintain or even gain weight—are now also helping residents avoid becoming overweight.

### **Here’s how a senior care community can help:**

**Providing meals that are both appetizing and healthy.** As we grow older, our metabolism slows down and we need less fuel for our bodies. But our need for nutrients does not decline. This means that every calorie must count! According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Most older Americans are having trouble fitting the recommended number of daily food group servings into their decreased calorie budgets.” Seniors who live at home with health challenges often find themselves relying more and more on frozen meals and prepackaged foods. But these foods are higher in fat and sodium, and lower in nutrients, than the

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# 10 Things You Might Not Know About Falls

September 23, 2019 is the first day of fall—and it's also  
National Falls Prevention Awareness Day!



## 1. Falls are a serious health problem for our nation's seniors.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), each year three million older adults go to the hospital after a fall. 27,000 of them will die as a result of their fall injuries, and many more will experience disability and loss of independence.

## 2. The risk doesn't suddenly begin at age 65.

Around 10% of people between the ages of 40 – 60 also will experience a serious fall, say experts at the University of Michigan. A recent study from Yale University found that the rate of fall injuries has been rising among the younger baby boomers, especially those who drink too much alcohol or take a lot of medications.

## 3. Not all falls can be prevented—but many can.

The first step is to know your personal risk factors. Certain health conditions raise the risk. These include Parkinson's disease, arthritis, osteoporosis, heart disease, stroke, vision and hearing loss, loss of sensation in the feet due to diabetes, and memory problems. Working with your doctor to manage these conditions is the next step. And did you know that many senior centers, senior living communities and healthcare organizations offer senior fall-prevention classes?

## 4. Fear of falling can actually raise the risk of falls.

Here's how it works: You experience a fall. Fear of falling causes you to cut back on your level of activity. This reduces your muscle tone, energy, reserve of energy, reaction time and alertness...which in turn makes it all the more likely that you will fall. This is a cycle of decline that should be interrupted ASAP!

## 5. Exercise is a top way to fight falls.

Ask your doctor for a "prescription" for an exercise program that includes aerobic, strengthening, flexibility and balance activities. Exercise strengthens the body ... and also the brain. "When we think about falls, we often think about loss of muscle strength and poor balance," said Dr. Teresa Liu-Ambrose of the University of British Columbia. "The ability to remain upright and not fall is also dependent on cognitive abilities—calculating how far to lift your foot to get over a curb, making a decision as to when to cross the road, and paying attention to your physical environment while you are having a conversation."

## 6. We can improve our sense of balance.

Some falls are caused by disorders of the vestibular system, located in our inner ear, which is important for our sense of balance. These disorders often can be treated. We can also "build" our balance abilities. Ask your doctor about a balance class, with special exercises and activities such as tai chi that actually improve proprioception—our sense of position.

## 7. Medications can lower our risk of falling... yet they're also a top risk factor!

Prescription and over-the-counter drugs help us control the health conditions that cause falls. But certain drugs, or combinations of drugs, can cause dizziness, confusion, drowsiness and other side effects that affect our alertness and balance. One of the best ways to lower your fall risk is to ask your doctor to review all the medications you take.

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## 8. Regular hearing and vision tests are important.

Not surprisingly, vision loss is a top risk factor for falls. In some cases, vision can be improved with eyeglasses. Be sure your prescription is up to date, and if you wear bifocals or progressive lenses, ask your doctor if a second pair with single-vision lenses might be safer for walking. Our ears also provide a lot of important information about the environment around us that can help us avoid falling—so if you have hearing aids, use them!

## 9. Staying indoors doesn't lower the risk.

Do you think most falls happen when we're out and about? Think again! In fact, most falls happen right in a senior's own home. Lower the risk of falls with home modifications such as low-pile carpeting, improved lighting, handrails on stairs, and grab bars in the bathroom. Remove throw rugs, clutter and other hazards that could cause a stumble.

## 10. It's important to always watch your step.

Be aware of your surroundings as you make your way around your world. So many times, it's the things we don't expect that trip us up! Always be thinking a few steps ahead. And one more thing we folks of the 21st century should know: put your smartphone away. Today, many falls are caused by "distracted walking." Don't text while you walk—and, say experts, it's also better to sit down to talk on the phone, as well.

# Another Reason to Seek Treatment for Back Pain



A majority of older adults will experience back pain at least periodically. Back pain can be miserable, leading to depression, inactivity, and a loss of independence. It can even shorten life! Researchers from Boston Medical Center (BMC) studied 8,000 older women over the course of 14 years, and found that those who suffered frequent back pain also had a 24% increased risk of death during the study.

Back pain can be caused by conditions such as arthritis, osteoporosis or problems with the discs of the spine. The top risk factor is age—the years can take a toll on the structures of the back. Back pain makes it harder to be physically active, take care of one's health and perform the activities of daily living. The BMC research team concluded that these factors were the reason for the shorter lives of the people in the study.

The team wants to learn more about whether better management of back pain throughout life could help reduce later-life disability and associated earlier death. If you are suffering back pain, talk to your doctor. Treatment is available and includes exercise, physical therapy, medications and surgery.

## Give Your Brain a Workout!

**20 Ingredients for Healthy Aging**  
Experts say these factors promote physical, emotional and mental health in our later years. Give your brain a workout and find them all!

ACTIVITY	Z H I M E D I C A T I O N S U X
ATTITUDE	S T R E S S C O N T R O L O F V
BALANCE CLASS	P Q U I T S M O K I N G A C C Y
CREATIVITY	C A H W H Z U E R P J C U I J X
EMERGENCY	S R B E E Q M E M X U L G A Q S
FALL PROTECTION	U H E A A C T I V I T Y H L H E
FRIENDS	X E F A L L P R O T E C T I O N
HEALTH CARE	W A Y D T A T M S R K G E Z M I
HEALTHY WEIGHT	D T K K H I N H A L D R R A E O
HOME SAFETY	L T S W Y L V C C E E Z X T S R
LAUGHTER	Y I C B W G N I E A R E X I A L
MEDICARE	Q T L I E O A D T C R L P O F I
MODIFICATIONS	N U T R I T I O N Y L E D N E V
NUTRITION	S O Y S G V M E D I C A R E T I
QUIT SMOKING	Y E I J J H N F R I E N D S C Y N
SENIOR LIVING	Z V V G T Z I E X E R C I S E G
SLEEP	
SOCIALIZATION	
STRESS CONTROL	
VISION CARE	

**Experts say these factors promote physical, emotional, and mental health in our later years.**

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### **Weight Gain** *from page 1*

freshly prepared meals they will find in a senior care community, where the dietary department helps residents follow an eating plan that meets their nutritional requirements and any dietary restrictions recommended by a resident's doctor (such as diabetic, low salt, low fat or high fiber).

**Encouraging physical activity.** A healthy diet is half of the strategy for maintaining a healthy weight. Exercise is the other half. American Geriatrics Association experts report that a regular physical activity program can prevent disability even in extremely obese older adults. Physical activity burns calories, builds muscle mass and helps control appetite. But people with physical or cognitive challenges may have trouble getting enough safe, appropriate exercise. Senior living communities offer exercise and other activity programs that meet the needs and limitations of residents in a supervised and encouraging environment.

**Support for managing health conditions.** Arthritis, osteoporosis, strokes and fractures make it harder to be active. A cycle of weight gain can be the result. Senior care communities help residents manage their doctor appointments, medications, rehabilitation program and other physician-prescribed health management tasks.

**Mental stimulation and companionship.** Many seniors report that they do not eat healthy meals because it's just too much trouble to cook for one. For years, geriatricians cautioned that loneliness and isolation can result in an unhealthy weight loss for seniors who live alone—and they now also emphasize that loneliness can be a risk factor for obesity. An isolated senior may overeat out of boredom, or skip meals and then fill up on junk food. Senior living communities emphasize social engagement and human connection—which might well be what a lonely senior truly craves instead of that package of chocolate doughnuts!

The National Institutes of Health has warned that by the year 2030, as our population ages, obesity-related illness will account for an estimated \$66 billion in additional healthcare costs. Senior care communities are important partners in bringing those numbers down.