

Speakers discuss keys to aging

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Think of healthy aging as something that can be, to a large part, actively created.

“You are literally at this minute designing the rest of your life,” Neil Nett, the wellness manager at St. James Place, told an audience gathered to learn ways to age gracefully — and healthfully.

Nett, a certified exercise specialist, was joined by two other staff members of the retirement community in a June 22 program for the public called “Live Life Well = Healthy Aging.”

Marlene Most, Ph.D., director of dining services, and Angéla Guinchard, life enrichment coordinator, joined Nett to talk about the three pillars of healthy aging: exercise, healthy eating and social engagement.

Most people already know what it takes to be “healthy and strong,” Nett said.

“You already know what it takes. We’re just here to reinforce it,” he said.

The root causes of most medical problems, Nett said, are smoking, poor diet and physical inactivity.

“Stay active like your body needs to be,” he said.

“Quality of life means preventing and managing chronic disease,” he said.

If there was a magic pill for good health, Nett said, it would make people stronger, more relaxed and mentally sharper.

Such a magic pill would help people sleep better and stay at a healthy weight and would do all the right things for blood pressure, brain function and the immune system, he said.

There’s no magic pill on hand, but there is something that does all of the above, Nett said, — exercise.

Nett classified exercise into two types: “heart exercise” and “muscle exercise.”

He defined heart exercise as moving at a moderate pace for up to 30 minutes, three to five days a week.

The 30 minutes of exercise don't have to be done all in one stretch, he said.

People should exercise moderately, meaning that they're breathing a little heavily but can still carry on a conversation, he said.

"We're not talking about making Olympic athletes," Nett said.

Muscle exercise means doing 10 to 15 repetitions of a strength exercise for each of the basic muscle groups, using weights — starting with a light weight and building up from there once 15 repetitions are reached, he said.

The basic muscle groups, according to several exercise websites, include those of the chest, shoulders, abdomen, back, biceps, triceps, upper legs and calves.

Muscle exercises should be done twice a week, with one or two days in between workouts, Nett said.

Along with exercise, good eating habits are essential to healthy aging, said Most, the director of dining.

"'Eat your fruits and vegetables.' How many of you told your kids that?" she asked the audience.

Most was formerly with Pennington Biomedical Research Center, where she established and directed the test kitchen there.

At the St. James program, she advised adding fruits and vegetables and reducing fats in the diet.

Such a diet, she said, can prevent hypertension, improve cardiovascular health, help the body control blood sugar, protect against cancer and improve the immune system.

Most noted that Mark Twain once said, "Part of the secret of success in life is to eat what you like and let the food fight it out inside."

She offered her take on Twain's quote: "Part of the secret of success in life is to eat fruits and vegetables that you like and let the food fight the aging process."

The final part of the program dealt with mental and social activity, relieving stress and keeping a purpose in life — all invaluable in creating healthy senior years, said Guinchard, the St. James life enrichment coordinator.

"Be with people," she said.

Belonging to a social group is "wonderful in helping you age in a healthy way," she said.

Keep learning new things, too, and find ways to ease stress, she said.

"You know what allows you to forget about those anxieties and the things that burden you," Guinchard said.

"We don't talk about these things often" she added, but to "love, forgive and pray" is important, too.

And don't forget to play, she said.

"Not like when you were a kid, but (doing) what lets you let your hair down," Guinchard said.

Residents and program attendees Tom and Margaret Oswald seem to have known all along about how to live healthy, longer.

Tom Oswald is 90, and Margaret Oswald is 85, and the couple enjoy playing bridge and dancing, they said.

Margaret Oswald may also have been something of a fitness pioneer in her lifetime.

"I've been in an exercise class ever since I had my children and that's been 50 years," she said.

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