

Exercise can help prevent falls for seniors, others

**“Moving Grays Harbor”
By Maryann Welch**

Many of us take walking and moving around easily for granted – I know I do. However, there are many people who struggle to stay on their feet just to perform daily activities because of illness, disabling conditions or age. One of the results of difficulty with movement can be falls.

A fall for an older person often starts a series of events that can lead to a decline in mobility, independence, quality of life and health.

This week, as promised, I'm passing on information from Jessie Stoppen, director of nurses for the Olympic Area Agency on Aging. She's bursting with enthusiasm and knowledge on how to prevent falls for older adults. Increased activity is key.

“Falls are the leading cause of injury-related hospitalizations for older adults in Washington State,” Jessie tells me.

“Many falls are caused by gradual changes due to aging such as changes in muscle strength, balance, vision, chronic health conditions and medications, and also improper gait or improper footwear.

The good news is that due to the costs – financial, health, social, independence, societal, etc. – researchers have been avidly studying fall prevention.

According to Jessie, “Just a small increase in muscle tone can make a big difference in ability, especially with frail people.

“The studies indicate that falls can be prevented and/or reduced with

education and interventions. Strength and balance exercises provide a significant benefit,” she said.

At a recent conference Jessie heard great success stories about exercise programs geared toward older adults across Washington.

“The stories were many, from improving pain management to gaining better sleep, returning to gardening, being able to decrease medications, and improving socialization. Others improved their endurance and some even regained their ability to walk.”

One of my favorite grocery clerks recently told me that she knows a lot of women who don't exercise because they have problems with any weight-bearing activity. Even for people who can't stand, exercises in a chair or even a bed are available to help them gain strength and better mobility, along with all of the other benefits of exercise.

I don't have room here to lay out the specific exercise or exercise programs, but Jessie said folks are welcome to call or stop by the Olympic Area Agency on Aging, 2700 Simpson Ave, Suite 205 in Aberdeen. They have two brochures available that give more details on fall prevention.

In the meantime, check out “F.R.E.E. For Life,” (Fall Reduction through Education and Exercise), a video produced by St. Peter's Hospital Fitness Center. It focuses on home safety and strengthening and balance exercises.

It will air on our local Comcast system, Channel 20, at 9 a.m. and again at 7 p.m. on Thursday, June 1.

If you're interested in having the exercise portion of the presentation aired on a routine basis, Jessie encourages you to contact the Olympic Area Agency on Aging at 538-2456 or 1-866-582-1487.

In addition, “Sit and be Fit” airs on our local PBS station, Channel 9 or 28 in Grays Harbor and Channel 28 in Pacific County, at 9 a.m. Monday through

Friday. It promotes functional fitness, healing and independence and is a good resource for fitness for those who are home bound.

Jessie's also compiling information about local exercise programs suitable for seniors in the region. Please call Olympic Area Agency on Aging with current senior exercise programs so they can be listed on the agency's web site at www.o3a.org.

And, a booklet, "Stay Active and Independent for Life," has recently been produced by the Washington State Department of Health. Jessie says this excellent resource will be available in the near future.

"It's never too late to begin exercise and increasing your strength," Jessie encouraged. "You can improve your circulatory system, your general strength and mobility, your gastrointestinal system, your overall sense of well being, your quality of sleep..."

"Every aspect of what we do will have a benefit from even a little exercise. And, as you age, activity can definitely reduce your chances of having a fall."

Upcoming fall prevention workshop

Mark Sept. 21 on your calendar. That's Fall Awareness Day. While all the details aren't set yet, the Olympic Area Agency on Aging is planning to gather experts and information to help assess risk and give information on fall prevention.

This week's challenge

Check out one of those TV shows this week. Also, for you older adults, ask the Olympic Area Agency on Aging for a copy of their brochures, "What you can do to prevent Falls" and "Check For Safety" printed by the Washington State Department of Health.

Mark Your Calendar

- **Anyday – Makarenko Park Trail.**
Two miles of gravel trails located in

the woods in Cosmopolis. Once in Cosi, go north onto G Street and then take a left onto Altenau Street. Go up the hill until you reach Stanford Drive and follow the road to the right. Road will dead-end at Makarenko Park. The trail winds through a lovely timber stand and is basically flat. This is also a great place to ride mountain bikes.

Maryann Welch is the director of Grays Harbor County's Public Health and Social Services Department.

If you have questions about becoming more active or have information about free or low-cost activity in the area, contact the health department at 532-8665 ext. 483, e-mail us at moving@co.grays-harbor.wa.us or visit our web site at www.ghphss.org.