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Benefits of shopping and walking for older adults

Two recent articles came to my attention that seemed appropriate to mention at this time of year. The "Comfort Keepers" newsletter (www.comfortkeepers.com), for which a variety of resources were pulled for their article, talked about the benefits for older adults to participate in shopping. Eureka Alert reports on recent study that shows easy-to-walk communities can slow cognitive decline (www.eurekaalert.org/pub_releases/2014-11/uok-rse110714.php). Since cognitive decline is one of the health issues most concerning to adults as they age, and also to their loved ones, it seems that some simple life activities might be more valuable than first thought.

The stereotype of aging people sitting in rocking chairs is a myth as many older adults are active, leading fulfilling lives, even often continuing employment outside the home. The fact that older folks are integrated and interactive in their communities has been shown to contribute to overall well-being. It is thought that the social interaction is key to a longer, more productive life. But most do not think about the simple act of shopping as contributing to a healthy and active lifestyle. However, even for those with physical limitations, involvement in the shopping process can have a significant impact overall.

Shopping is such a common activity, many do not think about the cognitive processes one uses in making purchases, even the simple everyday variety. The items needed must be identified, and then one must determine where to obtain those items, to evaluate and compare before and after purchase, and to determine value versus cost. Seniors who shop regularly stimulate the part of the brain involved in decision making processes. There are physical benefits as well. One study of more than 1800 individuals who were older than age 65 years showed that participants who shopped every day lowered their risk of early death more than those who did not shop. This was particularly true of men. It is thought that the physical activity (walking), the opportunity to make buying decisions and healthier food choices and social interaction all combine to prolong life expectancy.

Social interaction may be the most powerful of the of the above components in looking at increasing one's life span since studies have shown that social isolation reduces one's longevity. Shopping can offer the opportunity to meet and interact with new people during the outing as well as to enjoy the family and friends that may be accompanying the person who is shopping. This can be important information for seniors and caregivers to encourage the senior to continue to go out and assist with shopping even if it seems easier to shop *for* the senior.

A related article indicates that research shows that neighborhoods that promote walking can delay cognitive decline in older adults. It can be walking to get somewhere or for leisure, but safety is the important element. A neighborhood that encourages walking results in better health outcomes such as lower body mass and blood pressure, as well as improved cognition and better memory. An important aspect is having a reason to walk to something, such as neighbor's houses, stores and parks. It bolsters the adage that "heart healthy is brain healthy." Utilizing that research, it translates that walking associated with shopping is also beneficial.

Especially in this area, walking has become a lost art for many. People in towns used to walk to pay their utility bills but outside of town, walking has become dangerous on narrow roads with no shoulders. Seniors who are thinking of moving should look at their desired communities as to whether walking is safe and encouraged. And although we should be careful not to spend beyond our means, the process of shopping can have many benefits.