

Exercise programs can offer support

By Jennifer Pannell

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When Wanda Spears first signed up for SilverSneakers in July of 2007, she was winded after climbing to the second floor at Searcy Athletic Club that she doubted she would be able to do any exercising. Wanda states, "At the encouragement of my compassionate and caring instructors I did what I could do and rested when I needed to rest. The instructors encourage us to do what we can do but not do anything that is painful."

Often she would sit in the chair for much of the aerobic exercises, but was still getting some benefit while exercising seated. Wanda states, "I am happy to say that at this point I normally stand for 30 minutes of aerobic exercises and sit during the stretching/cool down portion of class, and I have been able to discontinue the blood pressure medication I was taking in 2007, I have more energy, I am more flexible to bend and stretch in everyday activities and I enjoy being in a classroom with other individuals who are working to improve their health."

At Searcy Athletic Club, SilverSneakers is just one of the

many programs aimed at the growing senior fitness market. Heathways Inc., the SilverSneakers parent company, partners with more than 40 Medicare health plans and Medicare Supplement Providers nationwide. The health plan then offers the SilverSneakers program to their members at no additional cost aside from their premiums.

The average age of participants are 73 percent and 57 percent of those say they have never had a gym membership before joining. In a study published in January, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that regular use of Medicare-sponsored health club benefits was associated with lower long-term health care costs. Researchers determined that SilverSneakers members who went to the gym two or more times a week over two years averaged at least \$1,252 less in health care costs than those who visited a gym less than once a week over the same period.

The insurance industry and other large organizations are focusing much more energy on preventive maintenance like this. Seniors who exercise often don't need to go to the doctor as much.

They can come here and spend time with their peers, make new friends, have fun, and then they feel better able to do things like grocery shopping. Those that come for a few weeks are hooked and when they are unable to attend during vacations or brief illnesses, they really miss it.

Classes are held Monday through Friday for all levels of fitness. SilverSneakers members are not required to attend the aerobic classes and have access to all the clubs amenities. Each month Searcy Athletic Club hosts a party or get-together for the SilverSneakers. We like to entertain and help them meet new faces in the program. It's a way for everyone to get to know each other; and I know new friends have been made since some began SilverSneakers.

Medicare eligible Supplemental Insurance members on Humana, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Arkansas, Arkansas Community Care, Physicians Health Choice, and AARP Supplemental may be eligible for a membership to Searcy Athletic Club and ProFitness and no additional cost. Stop by today to see if you are eligible or call (501) 268-8080.

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