

New initiative to help seniors fight frailty, memory loss

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SINGAPORE – Over the next two years, more than 1,000 elderly residents in western Singapore could benefit from a new exercise programme to help them delay the onset of memory decline and progression to frailty.

The Healthy Ageing Promotion Programme For You (Happy), an initiative set up by the Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine at the National University of Singapore (NUS Medicine), was launched earlier this month at the Fei Yue Retirees Centre in Choa Chu Kang.

It is targeted to be expanded over time, the school announced yesterday.

The programme came about after a recent study by NUS Medicine showed that more than a third of the older population in Bukit Panjang were on the verge of becoming frail.

Of this group, 6 per cent were found to be frail, while another 8 per cent suffered from cognitive impairment.

Some 1,000 senior citizens aged 65 and above took part in the study.

Associate Professor Reshma Merchant, division head of geriatric medicine at NUS Medicine, conducted the study and is leading the Happy programme alongside National University Health System (NUHS).

She wanted to look at how seniors can continue to maintain their motor and cognitive functions beyond the age of 65.

The programme was launched as a way to help those who are weaker “maintain their functional ability and lead a good quality of life”.

The World Health Organisation defines healthy ageing as developing and maintaining functional ability.

The NUS Medicine research revealed that frail elders have worse outcomes when it comes to falls, muscle strength, walking speed, memory, and quality of life. They are also at higher risk of being hospitalised or having a disability.

The frailty of the study’s respondents was measured by five indicators — energy levels, difficulty in walking up one flight of stairs, difficulty in walking a distance of more than one block, losing 5 per cent of weight in the last six months, and having more than five illnesses.

If participants ticked one or two of these, they were classified as being “pre-frail”. Having three or more

showed that they were frail.

However, the study also found that 72 per cent of those who were “pre-frail” and half of the frail were still independent when it came to showering, eating, walking, and moving from bed to wheelchair, for instance.

Originally designed by the National Centre for Geriatrics and Gerontology in Nagoya, Japan, the Happy programme has been customised to in-

corporate games and songs familiar to Singaporeans. It also features dual-task exercises to train participants physically and mentally.

In one exercise, they are shown cards indicating different body parts and told to memorise them. Then, as they march on the spot, they tap their shoulders or hips, or stretch their arms, depending on what is shown on the card.

Exercises are conducted at Fei Yue Retirees Centre or the void deck of the block where the centre is located.

Ms Kok Ho Mol, 72, one of the 50 participants there, said: “I have fallen down many times, and have (pain in my hips) ... After exercising here (three times), I feel more agile.”

She has also “made a lot of friends, who are more like sisters now”, she said.

Expanding the programme

- The Happy programme will next launch at the Trans Focus Centre at Bukit Timah tomorrow, and at NTUC SilverAce senior activity centre in Taman Jurong on Sept 4.
- The NUS and NUHS are working with the People’s Association to introduce the exercise programme in public housing estates across the country.