

Happy hour helps seniors delay frailty and disability

Worrying findings of a local study prompt start of new exercise programme for elderly

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Listening intently to the lead volunteer, a group of 30 seniors marched on the spot while playing a memory game matching parts of their body with letters of the alphabet.

These seniors at Choa Chu Kang Fei Yue Retirees Centre yesterday were participating in a programme designed to help seniors delay frailty and disability.

Called Healthy Ageing Promotion Programme For You (Happy), it was prompted by findings from a local study in which more than one-third of 1,051 participants aged 65 and above from Bukit Panjang

were considered “pre-frail” or on the verge of becoming frail. Six per cent of participants were frail.

Frailty is characterised by reduced strength, endurance and physiological function, an increased vulnerability to stress and falls, and health issues such as disability, as well as memory problems.

“As the magnitude of pre-frailty and frailty increases, the prevalence of chronic health conditions, such as hypertension and diabetes, goes up,” said Associate Professor Reshma Merchant, who heads the programme and was one of the study’s researchers.

In the study, a significantly larger proportion of frail participants had

two or more chronic health conditions, such as diabetes and stroke, compared with pre-frail and robust participants.

Furthermore, only half of frail and three-quarters of pre-frail participants were still able to do daily activities such as bathing, eating and walking independently.

The figures are worrying, especially as the old age support ratio in Singapore is projected to fall from 4.7 working age adults (aged 20-64

years) to every elderly person (aged 65 years and above) in 2016 to 2.3 working age adults in 2030, said Prof Merchant.

The programme in Choa Chu Kang yesterday aims to help seniors maintain their functional ability through dual-task exercises, which combine physical and mental activities.

Each free, twice-weekly session lasts for an hour and is led by a volunteer, a senior who is trained by

therapists from the National Centre for Geriatrics and Gerontology in Nagoya, Japan.

The programme, launched at the start of this month, is led by the National University Health System (NUHS) and the National University of Singapore Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, in collaboration with the Japanese centre.

A similar exercise programme used by the Japanese centre for seniors with mild cognitive impair-

ment had found that their condition had improved or stabilised after 10 months.

Mr Mok Joo Kia, 73, who is one of the first few volunteers to be trained, thinks the activities are “very effective”.

The programme will be rolled out to Trans Focus Centre in Toh Yi Drive tomorrow, and SilverACE in Taman Jurong next month.

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Each Happy Ageing Promotion Programme For You (Happy) session lasts for an hour and is led by a volunteer, such as Mr Mok Joo Kia (in red T-shirt). The programme will be rolled out to various centres. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO



WATCH THE VIDEO

Seniors exercise during the Happy programme
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