

Frailty tests for elderly at senior activity centres

Researchers will screen 300 seniors as they seek to delay or even reverse the condition

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There are health screenings these days for anything from diabetes to heart disease to dementia. Soon there will even be screenings to determine if one is frail or not.

Some community and healthcare institutions here are planning to check for signs of frailty in the elderly in a bid to help them prevent, delay or even reverse the condition.

It is only in recent years that frailty has become more widely known as a clinically recognisable syndrome and not just a mere descriptor of an effect of ageing.

Frailty is diagnosed when three or more of these five criteria are met: unintentional weight loss of 5kg or 5 per cent or more of one's weight in the past year, self-reported fatigue, difficulty in walking up 10 steps or covering several hundred metres, as well as having illnesses.

The presence of one or two of

those criteria would identify a person as "pre-frail".

Physically frail persons are two to 10 times more likely to be unable to carry out daily living activities, be hospitalised and die earlier than their robust counterparts, said Associate Professor Ng Tze Pin of the National University of Singapore (NUS).

He had previously led a four-year study – the Singapore Frailty Interventional Trial – that showed that frailty can be reversed with good nutrition, physical activity and cognitive stimulation.

Come February, a team of researchers from NUS and the Geriatric Education and Research Institute will put theory and research findings into practice, and seek to delay or reverse frailty in 300 seniors in the community.

These seniors will undergo frailty screening at senior activity centres run by NTUC Health in Whampoa and Taman Jurong, and centres run by Presbyterian Community Services in Hougang and Tampines.

Those found to be frail will be enrolled in an exercise and nutrition programme for three months at St Luke's Hospital in Bukit Batok. It involves weight and power training, dancing and monitoring their diets.

Those who are less frail will un-



Staff from the Geriatric Education and Research Institute conduct blood pressure checks prior to carrying out a simple exercise session for older adults. PHOTO: GERIATRIC EDUCATION AND RESEARCH INSTITUTE

dergo similar programmes run by trained staff and volunteers at the senior activity centres.

"Currently, there are so many different types of exercise programmes conducted at senior activity centres," said Dr Stella Ma, senior research fellow at the department of psychological medicine at

NUS, who will be leading the three-year study.

She added that the power training programme that will be offered to the seniors is backed by research, and the team hopes that eldercare centres islandwide would adopt the same standardised exercise regimen.

ARE YOU FRAIL?

Frailty is diagnosed when three or more of these five criteria are met:

- Unintentional weight loss of 5kg or 5 per cent or more of one's weight in the past year
- Self-reported fatigue
- Difficulty in walking up 10 steps without an aid or resting
- Difficulty walking several hundred metres without an aid
- Having illnesses, such as hypertension, diabetes, cancer, chronic lung disease, heart attack, congestive heart failure, angina, asthma, arthritis, stroke or kidney disease.

Said Mr Isaiah Chng, founder of Empower Ageing, a charity that helped to develop the power training programme for seniors: "This can go a long way in reducing the high prevalence of physical disability, hospitalisation and mortality in an ageing society."

Mr Chng is working with family doctors in Ang Mo Kio to screen for frailty in their elderly patients and refer them to exercise programmes. He also plans to partner nursing homes to improve rehabilitation for their seniors.

He added: "Growing old need not mean being weak and frail. Once they are stronger, they can do away with their walking sticks and even their wheelchairs."

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