

Over-55s hitting gym, packing fitness classes

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You're never too old to work out. You're only as old as you feel. Age is just a number.

Whoever coined those golden adages may have inspired adults 55 years of age and older in York Region — and please don't call them seniors — to voice their demands for a variety of recreational programs, all geared towards physical and mental wellness.

The communities, in turn, acknowledged the significance of creating programs to serve this demographic.

ZUMBA REPLACES CARD GAMES

"Recreation is essential to social and community development," Aurora recreation manager Melodie McKay said.

"We believe that recreation impacts one's overall quality of life by improving physical and mental health and contributing to independent living among our older adults."

Taking this into strong consideration, York Region municipalities have answered the call.

"There has definitely been a greater demand for senior fitness programming and we have responded by offering more fitness-related programs geared to older adults," said Whitchurch-Stouffville's recreation manager Micolé Ongman.

Markham, meanwhile has also seen an overall increase in participation by older adults, culture services programs manager Lori Wells said.

"Older adults today are definitely more active and we see this in the type of programs that are offered by the clubs as well as the participation in programs offered directly by Markham recreation services."

In Aurora, that's meant "an incredible 176-per-cent increase in participation in the last 10 years," Ms McKay said.

In Newmarket, participation is up 70 per cent, said recreation manager Brad Heppell. That translates into more classes, including Zumba, yoga, curling and shuffleboard.

At the same time, there's been a decline in less-active programs, such as card games.

The demographics of all communities include a growing segment of aging adults who were once baby boomers but are now entering the 55-plus era, said Barb Armstrong, Whitchurch-Stouffville's fitness supervisor.

"Those who were participating in fitness activities in their 40s have experienced great benefits from their activities and see no reason to change what they are doing because they are aging," Ms Armstrong said.

"In fact, as they age and their children become independent, they are taking on new pursuits. The 55 to 65 age group are very educated about the benefits of fitness and have the resources to participate."

"Activities like cycling, running triathlons and skiing are part of their routines and they realize that maintaining fitness is necessary to enjoy these activities."

Well established recreation clubs have also experienced increased participation.

When the Angus Glen Masters Badminton Club began six years ago, founder Vishvas Date, 72, recalled they only had a handful of members. Now, there are 130 male and female members 55 and older. That's capacity for their gym, five days a week.

FITNESS MEANS LONGEVITY

The club motto is fitness, fun and friendship.

"As health care costs continue to climb, prevention needs to be a part of the solution. Fitness and active living are necessary to help deal with rising health care costs," Ms Armstrong said.

And there's room for people in their late 60s and beyond, including those hesitant to try new programs and prefer participating with others their own age.

"For this group, we are continually looking for active living opportunities to offer — tai chi, aquafit, stretch and relax classes, walking with poles," she said. "These classes are geared to the seniors who



Allan Laing of Ballantrae gets in-home instruction from Claudiu Popa, owner and certified personal trainer of Stouffville's WorkoutSmart Personal Training. Not all seniors enjoy working out at gyms.

STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEEN

are perhaps working to maintain health and mobility. Active living is the key to their health moreso than the medical system."

If the communities cannot provide desired programs, private companies and certified personal trainers can cater to their needs.

In fact, they will do so by coming to your home and conducting fitness programs either on an individual or small group basis, said Claudiu Popa, a Stouffville resident and certified personal trainer who founded WorkoutSmart Personal Training two years ago.

"Older adults are now more aware of their physical condition and there's a relationship between fitness and their longevity," he said. "They enjoy life a lot more if they can take part in elements of an active lifestyle."

Working with a group of trainers, Mr. Popa said they will go to a home anywhere in York Region to provide a customized fitness program and instruction.

"That makes it invaluable," he said.

"Our focus is to replicate the safety of a gym situation in a home. We make sure we work with the right equipment and with the individual's physician."

A personal fitness trainer for close to 20 years, Mr. Popa said older adults tend to be intimidated by going to fitness centres, where there are younger people in better shape and instructors who may not be trained to work with seniors.

Workouts must be tailored to the person.

NEW TRENDS

"If someone is 85 years old and just had an operation and is in the process of recovering, you're not looking to enter a body building contest," he said. "But you want to regain mobility and strength to get their balance back."

Programmers are always looking for new ideas to attract participants.

"New programs are designed by looking at current trends, offerings at other centres, as well as direct input from the older adults themselves," Ms Armstrong said.

LET'S GET PHYSICAL

Trainer Claudiu Popa offers vital tips on adopting a more physical lifestyle:

- You don't have to go to a gym to have an effective workout. The benefits of walking, which can become difficult in winter, can be replaced with other fun exercises.
- Preserving your independence may require simple mobility and balance exercises.
- Exercise with a friend or spouse at home.
- Eat well, drink water and get ample sleep.
- Safety first. Always begin with a proper posture and stable foot positioning.
- Warm up with slow, controlled movements.
- Rehearse breathing in/out during extension/contraction, respectively.
- Take a sip of water every few sets to keep muscles oxygenated and tissue hydrated.
- Finish every workout with a gentle stretch.

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