

By COLIN MILNER

**T**he concept of active aging can be summed up in the phrase “engaged in life.” The International Council on Active Aging (ICAA) uses active aging to describe individuals and populations who live life as fully as possible within the dimensions of wellness (emotional, vocational, physical, spiritual, intellectual and social).

While physical activity is an important component of active aging, it is only one component. Fortunately, physical activity positively influences all of life’s areas by improving physical function and mental skills, improving outlooks, offering social contact and better preparing us overall for work and home.

The definitions of aging concepts are still in flux. This variation presents a challenge for researchers who are trying to find evidence to support programs and policies. Terminology can overlap or be ill-defined. Nonetheless, the following terms are increasingly used in the professional and consumer literature:

**Active aging** is defined by the World Health Organization as “the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance the quality of life as people age.” WHO explains that active aging allows people to participate in society as fully as possible according to their desires and needs. For example, a person with a chronic illness can still participate and live actively in other areas of life.

**Healthy aging** is minimally defined as the absence of disease and more fully explained as “a lifelong process optimizing opportunities for improving and preserving health and physical, social and mental wellness, independence, quality of life and enhancing successful life-course transitions” by Health Canada.

# WHAT IS ACTIVE



**Successful aging** is described by Rowe and Kahn, authors of *Successful Aging*, as living with a low probability of disease or disability, maintaining cognitive and physical function and staying actively engaged in life.

ICAA’s definition of active aging incorporates all these concepts, and links them to the parallel wellness dimensions.

## THE CASE FOR ACTIVE AGING

There are two good reasons to focus on physical activity for older adults:

### 1. It is the right thing to do for quality of life.

Physical activity prevents or controls the most common chronic diseases in older adults (for example, diabetes and heart disease), enables people to func-

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tion independently so they enjoy and grow in their lives, and allows older adults to stay part of the active lives of their children, grandchildren and communities. Think about the high-functioning older adults who are launching new businesses, becoming teachers and caring for grandchildren and the societal importance of quality of life becomes more pragmatic.

## 2. It is the smart thing to do to save money and generate revenue.

Controlling health care costs for private insurance, government and the consumer could save money—75% of the U.S. \$1.66 trillion health care cost (2003) is spent on a few chronic diseases. Already private insurers and businesses are incentivizing employees and insureds to exercise because it saves them money. What can private companies and consumers do with these savings? Spend it, which raises revenue for other companies. For example, the seniors housing industry is rapidly moving to focus on activity options for the buyers because these services generate revenue.

Quality of life is a top concern for aging adults, reinforced a 2005 poll by USAToday/ABC News. For the 1,000 respondents, losing their health (73%), losing the ability to take care of oneself (70%), losing mental abilities (69%) and running out of money (60%) topped the list of concerns. And these people were currently healthy—31% rated their health as “excellent” and 58% rated it “good.”

How do older adults maintain their health and their savings? Research provides a clear answer: exercise, physical activity, healthy eating and a healthy spirit. Physical activity and healthy eating can prevent or mitigate the most prevalent “lifestyle” diseases (coronary heart disease, diabetes and corollary high cholesterol, hypertension and metabolic syndrome). Health saves money for the government, the individual and the businesses that care for the older adult.

At the national level, almost one-third of U.S. health care costs, or \$300 billion each year, are for older adults, according to the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. The direct medical cost associated with physical inactivity was nearly \$76.6 billion in 2000. Engaging in regular physical activity is associated with taking less medication and having fewer hospitalizations and physician visits, states the center. The other way to look at these figures is that \$29 billion dollars can potentially be saved simply by increasing physical activity.

Since physical activity and exercise

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are the solutions to older adults’ biggest concerns, why aren’t more doing it? According to “The State of 50+ America 2005” report from American Association of Retired People (AARP), only about one-quarter of older adults are physically active: 28.8% of 50 to 64 year olds, 25.6% of 65 to 74 year olds and 16.3% of those 75 plus.

While the reasons for not exercising are complex, a simple way to look at the problem is lifestyle. “Older” older adults have more medical conditions and lack a culture that supports exercise and activity. “Younger” older adults know exercise is good and want to participate but lack the opportunity.

Yet, 98% of 50+ adults in an AARP survey are aware that getting enough exercise is important and 64% stated that physical activity was the “best” thing they can do for their health. This level of awareness means that marketers do not have to establish need, but rather show how they are providing a solution that will overcome the barriers.

The case for physical activity is well-supported by research. What private and public organizations need to develop are the opportunities for exercise and activity. In fact, a projected 78% growth in available programs is required to meet the needs of the aging population, project the authors of a new study that surveyed multiple types of facilities in seven regions in the United States (Hughes et al., 2005).

How will you respond to this opportunity? FBC

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Colin Milner, chief executive officer of the International Council on Active Aging™, has emerged as one of the nation’s foremost visionaries and original thinkers regarding the health and well-being of the older adult. An award-winning writer, Milner has authored more than 160 articles on aging-related issues.