



## Nutrition and Health

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# Programs for an Aging Population Focus on Small Ways to Make a Big Difference

*The percentage of the U.S. population over the age of 50 is rapidly rising, with the aging of the baby-boomer generation. In addition, a disproportionate share of this aging population growth is in rural areas, where access to health-based services is more limited and the mortality rate higher. Extension services across the country have found ways to target specific health and wellness issues in this age group through creative programming — and are seeing big results through these little changes.*

### Examples of this work include:

- U.S. adults' sodium intake consistently exceeds national guidelines; the average American eats so much excess sodium that even cutting back by 1,000 milligrams per day can significantly improve blood pressure and heart health. To help combat this concern, the University of **Arkansas** at Pine Bluff 1890 Cooperative Extension Supplemental Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) conducted weekly food preparation nutrition education with local senior residents, focusing on proper nutrition for a healthier lifestyle, including limiting sodium through salt alternatives and different seasonings.
- Age-related declines in muscle strength, flexibility and balance are key factors for falls, the loss of independence, and growing health care costs among older adults. Two programs at the University of **Missouri** Extension aim to combat these concerns. The Stay Strong, Stay Healthy resistance training program seeks to improve muscle strength, flexibility and balance of participants. The program expanded virtually during the pandemic, engaging older adults who normally would not have had access to exercise instruction or social interaction. More than 70% of participants improved 5 out of 5 physical health assessments, which included flexibility, strength and balance tests. In addition, their Fall Risk Reduction Programs have shared information with participants around decreasing risk factors related to falls. This project has helped reduce the percentage of older adults who report falling in Missouri,

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reduced the number of injuries related to falls, decreased the number of older adults who fear falling, reduced medical care costs and increased the number of older adults meeting the physical activity guidelines. Ultimately, these outcomes may result in an improved quality of life, independence and longevity.

- In **Wisconsin**, where two-thirds of the population is over the age of 50, Extension has implemented the Aging Mastery Program, an evidence-informed enrichment program developed by the National Council on Aging, in 37 counties. The series covers physical activity, healthy eating, social connectedness, advance care planning, community engagement and healthy relationships. All participants were able to identify at least one change they made toward better health and wellbeing due to the program.