

*We all know that physical activity is an essential component of a healthy lifestyle. We know, too, that it provides real, measurable health benefits. But many seniors face barriers to participating in physical activities, especially in rural communities. For the Clinton Family Health Team (CFHT), this challenge became an opportunity. They responded to it by launching Walking Wonders, a weekly one-hour walking and healthy-lifestyle program.*

## **BACKGROUND: BENEFITS AND BARRIERS**

Older adults benefit in many ways from physical activity. They are less likely to die early or develop chronic conditions such as heart disease, stroke, osteoporosis, diabetes, and certain cancers. Their balance and posture improve, which helps keep their muscles and bones strong. This, in turn, reduces the likelihood of falls and injuries, so they can enjoy more independence and quality of life.

Unfortunately, there are barriers that hold many older adults back from physical activity. Programs and workout gear can be costly for those on a fixed income. Facilities may be inaccessible to those with disabilities, or they may be located far from where people live. Some seniors feel that there is a risk of injury or that the environment is unsafe. Others may lack the necessary skills to take part in the activities that are available to them. Many of these barriers become more pronounced in a rural setting, where there is limited infrastructure and recreational facilities may be far from where people live.

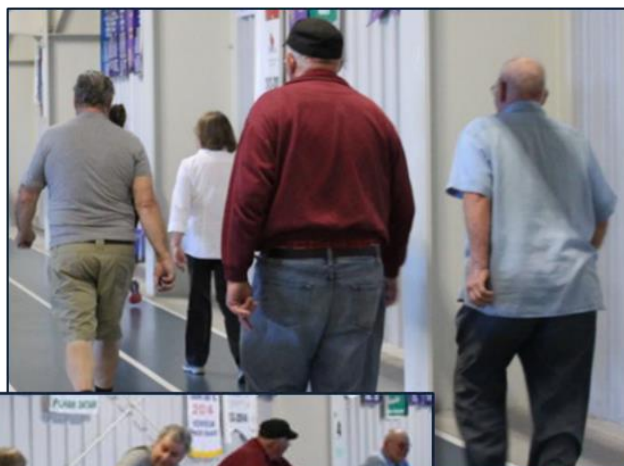
## **WALKING WONDERS: OVERCOMING BARRIERS SO SENIORS STAY HEALTHY**

Staff at Clinton Family Health Team looked at these benefits and barriers and saw an opportunity to help their older patients stay healthier, longer. In response, they started *Walking Wonders*. Seniors drop in for an hour of strength and aerobic activities along with healthy lifestyle and nutrition education. All participants get a healthy snack and can have their blood pressure measured.

What was their recipe for success?

1. **A healthy dose of collaboration.** A dietitian and nurse practitioner from Clinton FHT worked in partnership with staff from their local YMCA to develop and deliver the program.
2. **Outreach to patients and population.** Clinton FHT posted advertisements in the local newspaper and in the FHT waiting room. Doctors and dietitians recommended it to their patients.
3. **No cost to participants.** The program was offered free of charge, to be as inclusive and accessible as possible. YMCA staff donate their time (15-20 minutes per week) and equipment (elastic bands and weights); FHT staff donate snacks.
4. **A safe, accessible location.** The Walking Wonders meet indoors at the Central Huron Community Complex, which is free for the public to use.

*Walking Wonders* saw an average of 10-12 participants each week from September through June. Some had ongoing health problems they wanted to keep working on. Others kept coming because they enjoyed a sense of camaraderie. Through the program, they had made new friends or found a new way to connect with old friends. In addition to the social connection, these friendships motivated them to push themselves harder than they would when exercising alone: “No excuses... everyone’s watching!”



## MEASURING SUCCESS: WALKING WONDERS WORKS!

Outcomes are overwhelmingly positive. When the pilot ended, participants reported having more energy than when they started, and they were able to complete more laps. Their blood sugar and cholesterol levels improved. Perhaps best of all, the program kick-started their motivation to be physically active; some of them started exploring other fitness programs to join on days between *Walking Wonders* sessions! Clinicians love it too: Now, instead of just telling their patients that they should exercise, they can give them a location and time.

Program organizers have received such positive feedback that they are continuing the program beginning in September 2017.

## LESSONS FOR THE FIELD

Creating a fitness and healthy lifestyle program at **no cost to the participant** that includes a healthy-living education component **reduces barriers to physical activity and healthy lifestyle choices** for seniors living in rural areas.

While one hour, one day per week may not lead directly to substantial changes in health, it gives participants the **initiative and direction** to pursue more physical activity per week and attain healthy lifestyle goals.

**Want to know more?** Feel free to reach out to Wendy Madarasz, RD at Clinton FHT: **519-482-3000**.