

# Improving women's health and fitness in Wisconsin: The Strong Women™ program



**"I am able to get up out of my chair holding my grandson. I wasn't able to do this before."**

*—A grandmother who participated in the Strong Women™ program*

**"I have taught exercise and health classes for years and this Strong Women™ program has been the most rewarding....I have seen great commitment from the ladies in my class..."**

*—Strong Women™ trainer*

## Situation

Only 7% of middle-aged and older women exercise daily. Why is this number so low—especially since research shows that regular exercise benefits women in these age groups?

There are a variety of possible answers that could include women's lack of experience with exercise, lack of education, lack of available fitness programs, or simply fear of trying something unfamiliar.

Studies show that regular weight-bearing exercise helps older women increase their strength, muscle mass and bone density, and decrease the risk of osteoporosis, diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, depression and obesity. Regular exercise has also been shown to improve self-confidence, sleep and vitality.

Preventing the onset of osteoporosis—porous bones that break easily and heal slowly—is of particular importance for middle-aged and older women. One out of every three women over the age of 40 suffers from this condition.

The good news is that osteoporosis is preventable and treatable by regular weight-bearing exercise or activity.

But for many Wisconsin communities, the challenge lies in finding ways to provide education and opportunities for older women to get the essential exercise they need.

## Response

Cooperative Extension's Family Living Programs works to help Wisconsin families incorporate better nutrition and healthy activity into their lives. When educators learned about the Strong Women™ program, they recognized that it could serve as a way for Wisconsin women to achieve better health and fitness.

The Strong Women™ program, developed by Drs. Miriam Nelson and Rebecca Sequin of the Gerald J. and Dorothy R. Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, is an eight- to 16-week exercise program based on extensive scientific research. Participants attend classes for an hour, two times per week.

The program's effectiveness is demonstrated using the Senior Fit Test (SFT) which includes a total of five activities that measure the basic abilities necessary to perform daily tasks safely and independently. Participants take the SFT before and after the program to compare results.

In Rock County, the family living educator completed extensive training in the program and became the Strong Women™ Ambassador for Wisconsin,



which enabled her to conduct trainings around the state. In 2008, she held three sessions, resulting in a total of 82 new trainers representing 31 Wisconsin counties. Doctors, nurses, dietitians, public health educators, social workers, physical and occupational therapists, 20 UW-Extension educators, Hmong health educators, and leaders from the Ho-Chunk Nation became trainers in their communities. These new instructors went on to lead 120 Strong Women™ sessions across the state, reaching a total of more than 1,700 Wisconsin women.

## Outcomes

What impact did attending the Strong Women™ sessions have on the women who participated? Many who attended reported that they walked more, adopted a healthier diet and made a lifelong commitment to exercise.

In addition to exercise, the family living educator/trainers also incorporated health and nutrition lessons into the Strong Women™ sessions. Because of the focus on good nutrition, post-program questionnaires indicated that the women increased the amounts of fruit and vegetables they ate.

In general, women who received the nutrition lessons stated that they made healthier food choices and became more aware of their personal health as a result of what they learned through Strong Women™.

Evaluations from Rock County also revealed that:

- Of the 481 women who attended Strong Women™, 100% learned to use ankle weights and dumbbells to increase their strength.
- Based on the Senior Fit Test, 95% of participants had improvements

in strength, endurance, balance and flexibility.

- Twenty-seven of the 481 participants reported a decrease in their need for medication that targeted chronic conditions and pain.
- The Senior Fit Test indicated overall improvements in the following tests: chair stand, arm curl, two-minute step test, the sit-and-reach, the backscratch test and the eight-foot up-and-go.

While the women who attended the Strong Women™ training clearly gained physical benefits, they also become eligible for benefits of a financial nature.

Rock County administrators were so impressed with the program that they instituted a worksite wellness committee, of which the family living educator was a member. As a result, women who completed Strong Women™ training earned points that counted toward the reduction of insurance premiums.

In the future, the momentum seen in the Wisconsin Strong Women™ program will continue to expand as more trainers are recruited. Ultimately, Wisconsin women will become healthier and more independent as a result.

### For more information, contact:

Gayle Coleman  
Family Living Programs  
University of Wisconsin-Extension  
608-265-8928  
gayle.coleman@ces.uwex.edu  
or

Angela Flickinger  
Family Living Programs  
Rock County UW-Extension  
608-757-5696  
angela.flickinger@ces.uwex.edu

**“I have an easier time gardening. My legs are not as sore and I feel stronger.”**

—Sixty-nine year-old  
Strong Women™ participant

**“I am taking the classes so I can help my aging mother who uses a walker. Since we now do the exercises together, she is not using her walker!”**

—Mother and daughter  
who took part in Strong Women™



Photos: Angela Flickinger