



Problem

Physical activity has been demonstrated to reduce disability and prevent or delay the onset of many chronic conditions among older adults, helping them to maintain quality of life. However, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports 33% of older adults engage in no leisure time physical activity. To encourage increased physical activity, the SilverSneakers® Fitness Program is provided by participating health plans to their members at no additional costs to the member. The program includes a free basic membership to a network of fitness centers with access to all amenities and the signature SilverSneakers group exercise class. The program is designed to overcome many of the barriers to exercise experienced by older adults.

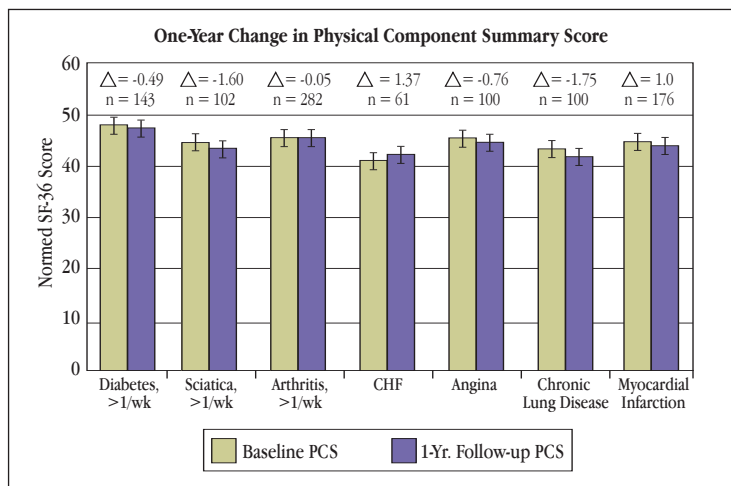
Methods

Functional and mental health status scores from SF-36® surveys collected from SilverSneakers members who completed a survey in 2001 or 2002 and then returned another survey in the subsequent year were analyzed for health status changes over time.

Conclusions

The SilverSneakers Fitness Program benefit provides members an opportunity to maintain their functional and mental health through physical activity programs despite the body of evidence that suggests age-related decline in health status.

Research from the Medicare Health Outcomes survey has shown that physical health status, as measured by the physical component summary score (PCS) of the SF-36® tool, typically declines by one point per year due to aging alone, with greater decline expected when aging is combined with chronic disease. Longitudinal data collected from SilverSneakers members showed no statistically significant loss in health status over one year, despite the prevalence of chronic conditions. These results suggest that the health maintenance benefit of participation in SilverSneakers extends across several disease states, consistent with the reported impact of physical activity on older adults with these chronic conditions.



In a study of SilverSneakers members who screened positive for depression, one year later their Mental Component Summary Scores (MCS) were an average of 7.68 points higher. The SF-36® literature reports an average improvement of 3.86 points for older adults screening positive for depression. Therefore, programs such as SilverSneakers that promote both physical health and social interaction may be a valuable adjunct therapy for members suffering from depression.

