

## **Community Healthy Eating Programs for Seniors**

Keller, H.H., Hedley, M.R., Wong, S.S-L., Vanderkooy, P., Tindale, J., Norris, J. *Community Organized Food and Nutrition Education: Participation, Attitudes and Nutritional Risk in Seniors.* J Nutr Health Aging 2006; 10(1):15-20.

### **AND**

Hedley, M.R., Keller, H.H., Vanderkooy, P.D., Kirkpatrick, S.I. *Evergreen Action Nutrition Lessons learned planning and implementing nutrition education for seniors using a community organization approach.* J Nutr Elderly, 2002;21(4):61-73.

## **Why are healthy eating programs important?**

Programs to encourage healthy eating and cooking are the most successful when they are planned and run by people in the community. Currently, few education programs are targeted at older adults and their specific needs. Evergreen Action Nutrition (EAN) was developed to provide nutrition education to older adults as a means of preventing chronic disease or maintaining their current status. The program was created by nutritionists and older adults in the Guelph, Ontario area. EAN consists of secondary preventative programs, such as food demonstrations or workshops that are run out of a senior's recreation centre. The program's focus is on seniors in the community and aims to address their needs and interests relating to nutrition and healthy eating. Workshops, food demonstrations, dietitian counseling, monthly displays and newsletters, and men's cooking groups run for 10 months of the year at the centre, and are open to any member. The program covers a wide range of topics, all of which are chosen by a planning group that includes older adults.

## **What was done?**

Based on the knowledge that programs developed using community participation are more relevant and sustainable, a survey was sent randomly to 425 members of a seniors centre in Guelph, Ontario to identify nutrition education priorities and preferred education formats. The results of the survey were used to design the format and topics for the EAN programs, including the food workshops and healthy eating displays. A planning committee of older adults who regularly attended the centre was created to develop, implement and evaluate activities. Activities are run weekly, and advertised through word of mouth. The participants pay a small fee to attend. Feed-back from participation led to the creation of a men's cooking group, as well as a Garden Fresh Box where seniors could buy fresh produce at the centre. A follow-up survey occurred 3 years later. Current members were randomly selected to complete this mailed survey that measured nutrition risk with SCREEN as well as participation and benefits of involvement in EAN activities.

## **What we found?**

The community organization approach to developing programs for seniors is both useful and inclusive. The seniors planning committee made several recommendations that went on to become successful programs at the seniors centre. The method of information delivery, such as the workshops and handouts, allowed the programs to reach out to a wide range of participants and address a large variety of topics. Based on the follow-up survey almost 2/3 of members (~2000 seniors) had been exposed to some aspect of the program during the three years. Half of participants were 'frequent' users of the program. Seniors most frequently reported reading the monthly newsletter or visiting the monthly display table for nutrition information. Other forms of education, such as food demonstrations were reported to have resulted in greater changes in food practices, such as changing cooking methods or increasing fruit and vegetable intake. Overall, seniors who participated in the follow-up survey had less nutrition risk than the baseline survey participants; fruit and vegetable intake seemed to improve the most during the three

years of EAN programming. Those older adults involved in the planning committee enjoyed providing advice on topics, and continued to take on larger roles in the committee as time continued. The program educator encouraged feelings of ownership and confidence in the committee, who felt they had contributed to helping themselves and their peers eat healthier and smarter.

**Importance of this research:**

The research shows the power of involving clients in planning, implementing and evaluating a nutrition education program. As well this research shows that a variety of education activities are needed to reach a diverse senior audience. All activities involved food, fun, and practical and relevant suggestions for improving food intake in older adults. The program's high participation rate can be credited to the approach which included the seniors in all stages of the program. The dedication of a single, consistent nutrition educator ensured that the topics flowed together, and were presented at a level that seniors could understand and relate to.

**Applying what was found:**

This study shows the benefits of including seniors' input and ideas when developing programs. The EAN project demonstrates that providing a mix of activities, such as workshops and displays, is the best way to get older adults interested and involved in the seniors centre environment, as older adults have divergent interests and nutrition education needs. The success of food workshops, such as the EAN programs, depends largely on the enthusiasm of the participants and educator. The research findings suggest that future programs should follow the successful template of EAN, including a seniors planning committee, and act on feedback and advice from a wide variety of groups.