



Improving women's health and fitness in Wisconsin: the Strong Women™ Program

“It’s a self-motivator because you do feel better. And you want to get out there and do other stuff in life, and this just helps you do it.”

—Strong Women™ participant



Situation

Research shows that regular exercise provides many benefits to mature women. Yet only 7% of middle-aged and older women exercise daily.

Regular weight-bearing exercise helps older women increase their strength, muscle mass and bone density, and decreases the risk of osteoporosis, diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, depression and obesity. 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 especially important 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 exercise can contribute to the prevention and treatment of osteoporosis. 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

University of Wisconsin-Extension Family Living Programs works to help Wisconsin families incorporate better nutrition and healthy activity into their lives. With leadership provided by UW-Extension, the Strong Women™ program offers Family Living educators and other community leaders a means to help women achieve better health and fitness.

Strong Women™, developed at Tufts University, is a national evidence-based community exercise and nutrition program targeted to midlife and older women. Trained leaders are responsible for planning, promoting and teaching the 10–12 week classes in their communities. The program helps women maintain muscle mass, strength and function as they age.

The effectiveness of Strong Women™ is demonstrated using the Senior Fit Test (SFT). Prior research has confirmed that participants experienced improvements across several important domains of physical fitness.

Research also supports that a Strong Women™ community-based program can improve self-efficacy, increase physical activity, and decrease energy intake, resulting in decreased waist circumference and body weight among at-risk women. Strength training through Strong Women™ has likewise been associated with significant improvements in body image, health-related quality of life, and physical activity behaviors, satisfaction, and comfort among rural aging women.



Family Living Programs Impact Report

In Rock County, the UW-Extension 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. Since 2008, she has conducted 34 training sessions, resulting in a total of 567 leaders from 61 Wisconsin counties. Doctors, nurses, dietitians, public health educators, social workers, physical and occupational therapists, UW-Extension educators, Hmong health educators, and leaders from the Ho-Chunk Nation have become Strong Women™ trainers in their communities.

Outcomes

Since the program began in Wisconsin, Strong Women™ leaders have conducted sessions reaching more than 15,000 participants. In 2014 alone, 107 leaders taught 245 sessions in every corner of the state.

What impact did attending the Strong Women™ sessions have on the women who participated?

More than 120 respondents to a 2014 statewide leader survey reported a variety of impacts for themselves and their participants as a result of Strong Women™. Focus group research confirmed many of these findings, including increases in:

- Strength and improved health and wellness.
- Balance.
- Competence and confidence in ability to complete daily activities.
- Social connectedness.

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 momentum seen in the Wisconsin Strong Women™ program continues to expand as more trainers are recruited. Five more leader trainings are scheduled for 2015. Ultimately, Wisconsin women will become healthier and more independent as a result.



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