

Physical training and social support reduce frailty and malnutrition

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Physical training and social support reduce frailty and malnutrition. Credit: Medical University of Vienna

A training program for the reactivation of older and frail people established by MedUni Vienna has achieved remarkable success. It was revealed that physical training and addressing nutrition-relevant aspects with the aid of non-professional volunteers at home has had positive effects on the physical condition. Particularly the "social aspect" is of great significance.

According to studies, 11% of the over 65's in Austria are frail and 41% are pre-frail. Frailty is a geriatric symptom consisting of a combination of sarcopenia (reduced muscle mass and/or muscle power), malnutrition (undernourishment or overeating) and chronic inflammation and is associated with enormous health problems for the affected persons. Preventative programs, consisting of a combination of social support, nutrition and exercise intervention can prevent malnutrition and frailty and reduce isolation and loneliness, particularly in case of people who live alone and hardly ever leave the apartment.

Non-professional volunteers working in an honorary capacity "activate" frail people

MedUni Vienna (Institute for Social Medicine), together with the Vienna Hilfswerk (relief organisation) and Sportunion Austria, initiated the project "Healthy for life". The project was promoted by the Vienna Science and Technology Fund. Volunteers working in an honorary capacity (so-called "buddies") visited frail or malnourished people (average age 83 years) in their homes twice a week for a period of twelve weeks. The skilled buddies trained together with the frail people (strength training with a Thera ribbon) and discussed nutrition-related aspects. An active control group also received visits, but without nutrition and exercise intervention.

After twelve weeks, a significant improvement in the frailty status and malnutrition risk was recorded. The prevalence of impaired nutritional status in the training and nutrition group was reduced by 25%, frailty by 17%. It was remarkable that the control group, who only received social support, also recorded improvements (23% less impaired nutritional status and 16% less frailty).

An active social life is important for physical wellbeing at an advanced age

"The results show that healthy nutrition and physical activity particularly at an advanced age have a special significance for the promotion of health and wellbeing and maintaining autonomy", explains first author Eva Luger of the Institute for Social Medicine of MedUni Vienna; "one essential prerequisite for healthy nutrition and physical activity is social support, particularly in case of older people".

"An active social life and social contacts are important factors to remain autonomous for as long as possible", emphasises study leader Thomas E. Dorner from the Institute for Social Medicine. "It

also became evident that trained non-professional volunteers achieve similarly good results with such a program as those conducted by health professionals."

As many frail people live alone and hardly ever leave their apartment, nutrition and exercise programs based on [social support](#) are a good solution for the prevention and reduction of frailty.

More information: Eva Luger et al. Effects of a Home-Based and Volunteer-Administered Physical Training, Nutritional, and Social Support Program on Malnutrition and Frailty in Older Persons: A Randomized Controlled Trial, *Journal of the American Medical Directors Association* (2016).
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