



## Activities at Skilled Nursing Facilities – It's Not Just About Bingo



Staying socially engaged as we age is an essential component to our overall health and well-being. Several studies have shown that people who are more social get sick less and have healthier minds. A study from Rush University discovered that a higher level of social engagement and support in old age is associated with better cognitive function. And a study from the Harvard School of Public Health found that older people who engaged in a lot of social activity had a slower rate of memory decline compared to those who were less socially active.

As the evidence for the importance of socialization continues to pile up, today's skilled nursing facilities have taken note. Always seeking to enhance the full spectrum of human experience, nursing homes have taken a holistic approach to their residents' welfare by offering a range of activities that spark people's mind, enthusiasm and spirit.

Because both physical activity and mental stimulation have also shown to keep the mind sharp, many

activities focus on these two elements. Participating in creative pursuits can feed the soul. And playing games is just plain fun. Here are just some of the activities you'll find residents engaged in:

### Physical Activities

Formal exercise classes obviously need to be tailored for the physical limitations of participants, but much can be accomplished even while seated. Residents can also be encouraged to garden or walk the grounds. Movement helps keep the brain from shrinking and according to the Alzheimer's Research & Prevention Foundation, physical exercise reduces your risk of developing the disease by 50 percent.

### Mentally Stimulating Activities

Book clubs, chess games, lectures series and study all help keep the mind active, which is important for keeping the brain healthy. In a study published in Neurology, researchers discovered that older people who engaged in mentally stimulating activities such as chess, reading a newspaper or learning a new skill were 2.6 times less likely to develop dementia than those who were cognitively inactive.

### Creative Endeavors

Arts and crafts of all kinds – knitting, painting, beading – are great activities because they not only engage the brain, but also provide an outlet for creative expression. Art therapy can be particularly valuable for those living with dementia because the disease may leave

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# Experts Urge Seniors to Spend More Time in Nature

Though we are all creatures of nature, these days we're more likely to find ourselves removed from the natural world. This might be by choice, as we opt to spend our hours indoors, under artificial light, staring into one glowing device or another. Or, we might have little choice, as is sadly the case for many seniors living with mobility-limiting health challenges.

An important University of Minnesota study from 2015 revealed that spending time in green spaces — and in “blue spaces,” such as rivers, oceans or ponds — is very important for the health and well-being of older adults. Lead author Jessica Finlay said, “We zoomed in to everyday life for seniors between the ages of 65 and 86. We discovered how a relatively mundane experience, such as hearing the sound of water or a bee buzzing among flowers, can have a tremendous impact on overall health.”

**Why is getting out in nature so important? Finlay and many other experts offer reasons seniors should spend more time in the great outdoors. They say spending time in nature ...**

**Encourages physical activity and engagement.** Finlay pointed out, “Accessibility to everyday green and blue spaces encourages seniors to simply get out the door. This in turn motivates them to be active physically, spiritually and socially, which can offset chronic illness, disability and isolation.” Spending time outdoors fights boredom and raises self-esteem. Finlay’s team also noted that outdoor spaces encourage multigenerational interactions, which are emotionally nourishing for most seniors.

**Increases energy.** A University of Rochester study found that being outside makes us feel more energetic and alive! According to psychology professor Richard Ryan, “Nature is fuel for the soul. Often when we feel depleted, we reach for a cup of coffee, but research suggests a better way to get energized is to connect with nature.” Ryan’s research found that “90 percent of people report increased energy when placed in outdoor activities.”

**Fights depression.** Seniors are at higher risk of depression, which can lead to a spiral of decline if not addressed.

Spending time in a natural setting has long been “prescribed” to boost our mood. We are inspired by the beauty of nature, by the clean air, sounds and sights. A 2014 University of Michigan study found that going for group walks in a natural setting could be an alternative to medications for older people who are dealing with stressful life circumstances, such as loss of a loved one or serious illness. The University of Minnesota study noted that waterfront areas are especially comforting for those who are grieving, providing a sense of spiritual connectedness with deceased loved ones.



**Boosts memory.** Another University of Michigan study, published by the Association for Psychological Science, found that interacting with nature improved memory performance and attention span by 20 percent. The authors speculated that this is in part because natural environments are far less stressful. Urban environments, they say, feature “a relatively complex and often confusing pattern of stimulation, which requires effort to sort out and interpret.” Natural environments, however, “permit us to replenish our capacity to attend and thus have a restorative effect on our mental abilities.”

**Improves physical health.** Spending time in nature has been shown to boost the immune system. And a 2015 University of Chicago study showed that even living in a neighborhood with lots of trees can help improve our cardiovascular and metabolic health, as well as lowering our blood pressure and stress levels. Study author Marc Berman explains that urban trees improve air quality, and provide a more inviting environment for exercise. Said Berman, “We have known that the natural environment can improve health, but this study shows for the first time how big that impact can be.”

**Lengthens life.** A 2016 study from Harvard University found that no matter their age, socioeconomic status or race, people whose homes are surrounded by vegetation lived 12 percent longer. Among the 100,000 women in the study, those who lived surrounded by trees and plants had a 34 percent lower rate of death from respiratory ill-

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# Aging and Caregiving in the News

**Information, updates and interesting tidbits from across the country and around the world.**

## **In this issue:**

- Elders played an important role in human survival — and still do!

## **Online:**

- A landmark study confirms that exercise protects the brain.
- When should I collect Social Security?

## **The Role of Elders in Human Survival**

Why do humans live so long? Anthropologists speculate that for our Stone Age ancestors, the presence of a supportive generation of elders raised the chance of survival of offspring — just as it helps children thrive today. To learn more about how our ancestors might have benefited from a long



lifespan, a study from Chapman University observed the role of elders among people who live in small, isolated bands today. Prof. Eric Schniter reports, “Not all abilities peak in middle adulthood as previously thought. As adults continue to age beyond their reproductive years, despite physical frailty setting in, they are often regarded as experts — such

as in music and storytelling.” It takes years to gain expertise in complex skills, and in pre-industrial societies, seniors also are the ones who teach those survival skills to younger people. What can our own industrialized culture learn from this? Schniter noted that in the people he studied, older adults are “the age group that excelled most at planning, conflict negotiation and delegation,” and says, “Those are prized talents in any economy; so if baby boomers delay retirement, as some economists predict, it might behoove employers to better deploy them.”

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## **Activities** *from page 1*

expression intact. Residents may be able to express something in a painting or a sculpture that they can no longer express verbally, giving them a sense of connection they may have felt was lost.

## **Games and Entertainment**

Games, movie nights, and visiting entertainment are wonderful ways for people to connect with each other and enjoy some fun. While some people joke about the popularity of Bingo in senior living setting, the game actually gives our mind a pretty good workout! Plus, it’s fun. Many residents also enjoy games such as bridge, dominoes, Scrabble, backgammon and poker. Sing-alongs stimulate the mind, and allow residents to show off their talent. Movies can provoke discussion and take residents to another place and time.

## **Events**

Holidays, birthday celebrations, and other special events, such as Casino Night or costume parties, are great socializing opportunities. Celebrating milestones, honoring holiday traditions, and even resident talent shows are wonderful ways to engage the entire community while boosting residents’ spirits and self-esteem.

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### **Nature**, *continued from page 2*

ness, and a 13 percent lower rate of cancer death. Said Harvard epidemiology researcher Peter James, “We know that effects of climate change. Our new findings suggest a possible co-benefit — improving health — that presents planners, landscape architects, and policy makers with a potential tool to grow healthier places.”

#### **Helping Seniors Get Into the Wild — or the Park**

Seniors don't need to go on a wilderness trek to benefit from nature. More communities today offer outdoor programs to meet the needs of older adults. If the area where you live is blessed with areas of natural beauty, take your loved one on a day trip to a beach or lake, or perhaps for a day of fishing with the grandkids. An outdoor concert, a picnic or a short walk through a park or arboretum also can be nourishing for the spirit. If your loved one has mobility challenges, find out about natural habitats in your area that feature boardwalks or accessible trails. If there's a fountain nearby, sit and enjoy the water sounds. Find sensory gardens full of smells and sounds if your loved one is visually impaired. You can even incorporate these principles in your own garden. If your loved one lives in a nursing home or other senior living community, sit outdoors during visits when the weather permits. These days, you are likely to find that the facility embraces the Greenhouse model, bringing the outdoors indoors with plants and pets.

#### **Make Natural Spaces a Priority for Our Growing Senior Population**

There's much we can do to address the nature deficit for elders in our communities. University of Minnesota's Jessica Finlay says, “We don't just need a playground for children. We also need sheltered benches for the grandparents who watch them.” Deborah Cohen, Senior Natural Scientist at the RAND Corporation, urges public agencies to make parks more senior friendly, with walking loops and classes geared toward older people. “It's really sad that so few seniors are using our public parks,” she said. “We need to make changes to attract older people to parks to exercise and stay active, especially with the increasing rates of chronic disease among older people and as our nation's population grows older.”

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