

Dance for life!

Program for Latino seniors improves physical activity

By Jeanne Galatzer-Levy

Vigorous activity can improve the physical and mental health of older adults, but for many, particularly Latinos, exercise is not a regular part of their lives.

Why not try dancing?

UIC researcher David Marquez was awarded a four-year, \$1.7 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to see if a four-month instructional dance program for Latino seniors can improve their level of physical activity — and with it, balance, mobility and cognitive function.

“Older Latinos are also at high risk of developing disabilities, and one of our long-term goals is to prevent disability among this disadvantaged group,” said Marquez, associate professor of kinesiology and nutrition.

Latinos ages 65 to 74 are much less likely than other seniors to participate in physical leisure-time activities, he said.

This could be why they are twice as likely to report difficulty walking as non-Latino whites and they develop symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease an average of seven years earlier, he added.

Dance is widely accepted among Latinos, but seniors have few opportunities for dancing and may not have danced at all since they were children, Marquez said. Night club dancing is often too fast-paced and too late at night for older adults.

In a pilot study of his dance program, Marquez found

that there was a lot of interest in dancing among older Latinos.

Marquez teamed up with Latin dance instructor Miguel Mendez. With input from focus groups, they developed BAILAMOS, an instruction program of Latin dances for older adults.

The tempo slows at times, and participants can spend more time on a given dance step if necessary. By the end of the class, everyone has learned the steps for four dances, Mendez said.

The four-month, twice-weekly dance classes will be offered in senior centers, community centers and park buildings. Half of the 332 older Latinos who will be recruited will be assigned to the dance instruction program, and the other half will serve as a control group for the study.

Participants will be followed for another four months after the classes end to see if they keep up their physical activity. Researchers will also look at whether benefits gained from the classes continue.

The program includes training for leaders at each class location to encourage people to continue dancing after the study ends.

Co-investigators on the grant include Michael Berbaum and Susan Hughes of UIC, David Buchner and Edward



Photo: Alex Rauch

An instructional dance program, led by UIC researcher David Marquez, helps Latino seniors improve their level of physical activity, balance, mobility and more to prevent disabilities.

McAuley of the Urbana-Champaign campus and JoEllen Wilbur and Robert Wilson of Rush University.

Other contributors are Mendez, Dance Academy of Salsa in Chicago, and Veronica Aranda and Sonia Lopez, University of Illinois Extension.

Dance for health!

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