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Sheryl Sarnack (center) conducts a laughter yoga class for senior citizens in a relaxing, more modern venue, the Senior Source, at Riverside Square Mall in Hackensack, New Jersey in 2012.

# Yoga improves balance and mobility for older people

BY KATHRYN DOYLE  
REUTERS

Yoga-based exercise programs can improve mobility among people over age 60 and possibly help prevent falls by improving balance, according to a new review of existing research.

“These results are exciting but not particularly surprising since there is evidence from other research that similar types of exercise programs, Tai Chi, for example, can improve balance and mobility in older people,” said senior author Anne Tiedemann of the George Institute for Global Health at Sydney Medical School, The University of Sydney, in Australia.

“What is exciting about the results is that significant improvements occurred in balance and mobility as a result of relatively short programs of yoga — the average number of hours offered was 20 hours,” Tiedemann told Reuters Health by email.

The researchers analyzed six trials, with a total of about 300 participants, looking at the effect of physical yoga on balance among men and women age 60 and older.

Five trials included people living in the community while the sixth included people in residential aged-care settings.

Some did not specify the style of yoga tested, but all utilized a certified yoga instructor and props such as blankets, chairs, blocks, pillows, straps and mats. Programs tended to include 60 to 90 minutes of yoga once or twice weekly for a total of two to six months.

Participants attended about 82 percent of classes, which is a high attendance rate compared to many other programs, Tiedemann noted.

Overall, yoga was linked to a small improvement in balance and a medium improvement in mobility — such as walking speed and how easily a person can get out of a chair — though the review authors were especially interested in the effects on balance.

To train balance, you need to undertake activities that challenge your balance and to perform these activities in a standing position, Tiedemann said.

Three trials reported minor adverse events during yoga, like knee pain, low back pain or minor muscle strains, according to the report in Age and Ageing.

The researchers did not measure subsequent health events or falls after the yoga trials, so could not conclude that yoga reduces the risk of falls. Further research should investigate this question, the authors note.

Balance and mobility decline with age and the risk of falling increases significantly after the age of 65, Tiedemann said.

In previous research, she found that older people who are unable to quickly stand up from a seated position without using their arms for assistance are about twice as likely to fall in the next year as older people who can perform this task quickly.

“So reduced balance and mobility are linked to falls as well as loss of independence and lower quality of life in older age,” Tiedemann said.

mann said. “It’s interesting to note that balance and mobility can be trained and improved at any age — it’s never too late to start.”

It’s hard to say whether yoga improves standing or walking balance, and we can’t always tell if these will have any effect on falls, which is the real problem, said Pamela Jeter, a yoga expert at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, who was not part of the review.

“Balance is regulated by several systems in the body and I believe we need to understand where the deficit is coming from before we can target the intervention,” Jeter told Reuters Health by email. “Yoga is great as a therapeutic approach because it can be modified to the individual need or individual balance deficit.”

Psychological anxiety or fear of falling can also increase the risk, beyond just physical weakness, and the mindfulness component of yoga may be beneficial psychologically, she said.

“We would recommend that older people who are healthy enough to take part in regular physical activity could join a yoga class run by a yoga instructor who has experience with teaching older people,” Tiedemann said. “The type of yoga should be that which focuses on standing balance postures rather than relaxation/ meditation as the focus.”

Those with medical conditions that preclude exercise should consult a doctor before starting a yoga program, she said.

# Dietary supplement sellers to face fresh challenges in 2016

BY NOEL RANDEWICH  
REUTERS

SAN FRANCISCO — GNC Holdings, Vitamin Shoppe and other dietary supplement sellers could take a hit to their financial health in 2016 if safety concerns attract new action from U.S. federal and state officials.

Shares of GNC and Vitamin Shoppe fell more than 30 percent last year after allegations of impure and dangerous ingredients in dietary supplements hurt already sluggish demand for their products. They and other companies are still under scrutiny, with pressure building to tighten regulation on dietary supplements, which are not covered by U.S. rules governing pharmaceuticals.

Last year, a challenge from New York’s attorney general led to an agreement by GNC to adopt new testing standards for ingredients used in its products. On Nov. 17, shares of GNC briefly plummeted 27 percent and rivals Vitamin Shoppe, Herbalife and Natural Health Trends Corp. also sank on concern that the U.S. Department of Justice was about to name them in criminal and civil actions.

The Justice Department action turned out to be against another company, but the \$37 billion industry faces more scrutiny this year including a lawsuit and

investigation by the Oregon attorney general.

“This is something investors have to contemplate,” Jefferies analyst Mark Wiltamuth said. “These waves of media and regulatory attacks have impacted consumer sales trends and valuations.”

Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum has ongoing litigation with GNC for selling products with illegal ingredients. She is also conducting a separate investigation related to dietary supplements that has yet to be announced, a spokeswoman said.

“I do believe you will see more activity in 2016,” said Kevin Bell, a lawyer at Porzio Bromberg & Newman who represents dietary supplement companies. “There has been no real indication as to how much more aggressive they could, get but it has certainly spread beyond just New York.”

Dietary supplements including powders and pills aimed at weight loss, sexual enhancement and sports performance are regulated in the United States more like food than pharmaceuticals. Manufacturers do not have to demonstrate a product’s effectiveness or safety before introducing it.

But some of the products contain potent substances that have led to kidney fail-

ure, cardiac arrest and even death in some cases. Attorneys general in states beyond New York and Oregon have taken notice, and some legislators have also been pushing for stricter oversight of dietary supplements.

New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman said in a statement to Reuters he will keep sharing information and best practices with other states to improve oversight.

The U.S. Senate’s special committee on aging will likely take additional steps this year. Sen. Claire McCaskill, the panel’s ranking Democrat, in 2015 sent letters to retailers asking them to explain how they prevent the sale of harmful and fraudulent products, said Drew Pusateri, a spokesman for McCaskill.

Asked about the risk of increased scrutiny, GNC said in an email that 2016 will be pivotal in an effort with over 40 companies to improve safety standards and consumer perceptions in the dietary supplement industry.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest has spoken with federal lawmakers keen to close regulatory loopholes allowing the use of dangerous ingredients, said Laura MacCleery, the advocacy group’s director of regulatory affairs.

# Warning labels may stop parents from buying sugary drinks

BY LISA RAPAPORT  
REUTERS

Warning labels detailing health risks associated with sugary drinks such as diabetes and obesity may convince parents not to buy these beverages for their kids, a U.S. study suggests.

For the experiment, researchers gave 2,381 parents online surveys asking them to select a beverage for their child from a range of 12 sugar-sweetened sodas and juices as well as eight low-sugar options like water, unsweetened juices and diet sodas.

When pictures of the sugar-sweetened drinks appeared, parents were randomly shown warning labels, calorie icons or no health information on the front of the containers.

Absent any health information, 60 percent of parents picked a sugary drink. But with warning labels, just 40 percent of parents chose sweetened beverages.

“We were surprised at how large the effect was,” said lead study author Christina Roberto of the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

“Interestingly, calorie labels displayed on the beverages — which is what the beverage industry is currently doing — did not significantly influence parents’ choices,” Roberto added by email.

Two-thirds of U.S. children aged two to 11 years old drink at least one sugary drink a day, a habit that is linked to the risk of weight gain and obesity in adulthood, as well as cavities.

Part of the problem is that even when parents under-

stand that sodas might be unhealthy, they still don’t grasp that many sports drinks, juices and teas can also contain lots of added sugars, Roberto and colleagues note in the journal Pediatrics.

The study findings suggest that labels may be one way to discourage consumption of sugary drinks, though more research is needed to see how warnings work on consumers in the real world, the researchers conclude.

Lawmakers in New York and California are considering bills to require warning labels on sugar-sweetened beverages that are similar to tobacco warnings on cigarette boxes.

To assess the potential of labels to deter sweetened drink purchases, Roberto and colleagues showed some parents in the online survey one of four labels, with slight variations in wording to emphasize different risks such as obesity and diabetes.

One matched the label currently being considered in California: “SAFETY WARNING: Drinking beverages with added sugar(s) contributes to obesity, diabetes and tooth decay.”

Another label tweaked this wording to focus on prevention: “SAFETY WARNING: Drinking beverages with added sugar(s) contributes to preventable diseases like obesity, diabetes and tooth decay.”

Results didn’t differ significantly based on the slight variations in the wording on the warning labels, the study found.

Parents’ education level also didn’t influence which beverage they selected for

their child in the experiment.

Aside from the difficulty of mimicking real-world behavior in an online survey, another limitation of the study is that it didn’t measure the impact of the size of warnings or package design, the authors note.

In the real world, for example, parents may not focus as much on warning labels because they have to contend with children clamoring for sugary drinks in the grocery store aisles and yelling when they don’t get their way, noted David Studdert, a health law researcher at Stanford University in California who wasn’t involved in the study.

“We don’t know how the findings would translate into an actual retail environment,” Studdert said by email. “They almost certainly represent an upper bound on what might be possible, but the study suggests it would be worthwhile trying to find out.”

Most parents do want to make healthy choices for their children, however, and labels that make it easy to decipher which options are better may help influence shopping habits, said Julia Wolfson, a health policy researcher at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore who wasn’t involved in the study.

“Reduced consumption of sugary beverages among children and adults alike could be extremely beneficial for efforts to reduce obesity rates as these beverages are still widely consumed and are a primary source of added sugars and extra calories in Americans’ diets,” Wolfson said by email.

# Study finds US women waiting longer to have babies

BY DAVID BEASLEY  
REUTERS

ATLANTA — Women in the United States are waiting longer than ever to have babies, with the average age for first childbirth rising to a record high of 26.3 years as fewer teens give birth and adults postpone parenthood, a federal study found on Thursday.

First births to mothers under age 20 dropped 42 percent from 2000 to 2014, from 1 in 4 births to 1 in 7, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study.

Overall, the average age at which women had their first child increased to 26.3 years in 2014 from 24.9 years in 2000.

Teens’ increased awareness of the realities of pregnancy, and greater job and education opportunities for women, are among factors behind the change, said CDC demographer T.J. Mathews, adding that the United States still has a

younger average childbearing age than countries in Europe and Asia.

The U.S. trend accelerated between 2009 and 2014, the most recent years studied, according to researchers, although the report did not break out statistics for that time frame.

“We’ve seen these trends for decades, but the uptick in the last five years of the data was surprising,” said Mathews, one of the authors of the study.

Women are delaying parenthood across race and ethnic groups and geographically, the study found. The District of Columbia and Oregon had the largest age spikes, according to the study, which did not provide an explanation.

Increases ranged from 0.7 years in New Hampshire to more than three years in the District of Columbia. States with larger increases tended to be in the western United States.

Increased understanding of the difficulties of having a baby as depicted in reality television shows may have contributed to the decline in younger mothers, Mathews said.

“Maybe we’re getting smarter about these things,” he said, noting that the U.S. teen birth rate remains higher than in other developed countries.

At the same time, adult women continue to wait to begin having children, Mathews said, also citing more contraception choices as a factor.

The childbearing age may continue to rise, he added.

“We are up to 26.3 in the United States, but there are countries in Europe and parts of Asia that are over 30,” he said, noting that some U.S. populations already see that shift.

“We see groups in the United States, particularly Asian and Pacific Islanders that are edging toward 30,” he said.

# Sleep disruptions in seniors tied to unhealthy brain changes

BY ANDREW M. SEAMAN  
REUTERS

Older people who have trouble sleeping through the night are at an increased risk of unhealthy changes in the brain, a new study found.

The brain changes are tied to increased risks of strokes and other problems like dementia, the researchers say.

While the study itself is not conclusive, it adds to a growing body of evidence showing that “good quality sleep is important especially when people get older,” said lead author Dr. Andrew Lim, of the University of Toronto in Canada.

He and his colleagues report in the journal Stroke that waking up several times during the night — known as sleep fragmentation — is tied to subtle changes in the brain that often can only be confirmed with autopsies.

The new study involved 315 people who had worn activity-tracking monitors at least once while they were alive. The tracker also monitored their sleep. When the people died, at an average age of 90, the researchers were able to study their brains.

Nearly a third of the brains showed evidence of strokes, and nearly two-thirds had at least one area of moderate to severe damage to blood vessels.

The more severe the person’s sleep fragmentation was, the greater was their risk of hardening of the small arteries in their brains. The risk of having brain tissue killed in small strokes due to lack of oxygen also increased as sleep fragmentation worsened.

It’s possible, Lim said, that “repeated waking during the night could lead to a rise in blood pressure” that could

damage the blood vessels. Also, he said, conditions like sleep apnea may play a role in keeping oxygen from the brain.

Lim cautioned that the new study cannot tell whether sleep problems caused the brain damage, or the brain damage caused the sleep problems, or whether something else is to blame.

Regardless, he and his colleagues write, these changes in the brain are tied to strokes and worsening problems with thinking and body movements.

“At this point in time we don’t have hard evidence that treating sleep fragmentation is going to make a big difference,” Lim said.

“We have to take a deeper look at what causes — and aspects — of sleep fragmentation are most strongly associated with this type of brain damage,” he said.