

Activating older adults

with 'Nordic' pole walking and exercise programs

For individuals of all ages and abilities, pole walking and exercise programs can be a 'gateway exercise' to improve health and function

by Tom Rutlin, BS



Among the most basic of all human activities, walking is essential to maintaining functional independence as we age. However, declining confidence, muscle fitness and proprioception (which allows us to sense body position in space) can threaten our ability to walk safely and thus stay independent. "Nordic" pole walking and pole exercise programs offer simple, effective options for regular physical activity participation, promoting health, function and independence in older adults.

Pole walking provides a total-body workout by combining fitness walking with

In Rockford, Illinois, Nordic walking pioneer Tom Rutlin (at left, in black shirt) leads the Wesley Willows pole walking group on a Senior Health and Fitness Week walk



cross-country skiing through the use of specially designed poles. This article relates what research projects at a senior living community reveal about the benefits of this activity for older adults. It also shares some experiences in pioneering programs along with pointers from the professionals who lead them.

Pole walking research

Peggy Buchanan was initially attracted to pole walking around 2004 because of her more than 20 years of work with older adults in fitness and the ongoing challenge of creating new programming



for this population. As director of fitness, aquatics and physical therapy at Vista del Monte active retirement community in Santa Barbara, California, and coordinator of vitality wellness programming for senior service agency Front Porch, Buchanan had also worked closely with physical therapists for many years. She saw the need for an effective alternative to walkers and canes.

“Using traditional assistive walking devices can help individuals maintain their mobility, but I have seen balance decline with the use of traditional assistive de-

vices over time,” says Buchanan. “The constant use of a cane and/or walker can actually contribute to more of a balance challenge, especially if the device is used to ‘lean on’ rather than stabilize and promote good posture. Maintaining vertical balance is no more than being able to keep the body’s center of gravity over its base of support,” she continues. “If you are constantly leaning to the side while using a cane, or forward while using a walker, you are actually training your body to be ‘off center,’ creating an even greater risk of falling when not using the device.”

Buchanan’s central challenges, however, have always included finding and implementing physical activity programs that can successfully activate both motivated and “exercise-phobic” older adults. In her view, pole walking had the potential to do just that. She also hoped poles might provide a more beneficial and functional assist to walkers than traditional assistive walking devices.

To find out, Buchanan conducted an eight-week pilot project at Vista del

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Sara Provenzano (third from left), now former wellness programs director at Wesley Willows, is pictured with her pole walking group at the Rockford, Illinois, retirement community. According to Provenzano, participation in the community's pole walking programs 'grew without promotion'

Monte that included 13 participants, average age 86 years, who had been using either a walker or cane. These individuals voluntarily traded in their conventional assistive devices for walking poles, and were soon marching together throughout the community. Buchanan noted almost immediate improvements in the posture and gait of all the former cane and walker users. Perhaps of even greater significance, "The subjects immediately shed a self-image of being an 'invalid,' and replaced it with that of being a 'senior athlete' in training," she states.

When other Vista del Monte residents witnessed these improvements in project participants, many individuals who were not dependent on canes or walkers

wanted to try the poles. Soon, Buchanan was able to partner with the kinesiology department at nearby Westmont College to conduct an additional research project to complement the pilot project.

A further 30 participants walked three times per week for 12 weeks in the second project—approximately half with poles and half without. In contrast to the "ordinary" walkers, the pole walking group showed significant improvement in cardiovascular endurance, upper-body strength, and overall balance and confidence at the project's conclusion, Buchanan notes.

Among the pointers she offers about providing such programs in senior liv-

ing communities, Buchanan stresses that "it is important to assess the stability of older adults prior to assuming they can have safe mobility with the poles. Less independent, lower-functioning individuals must develop the ability to stand and ambulate with the poles planted more vertically in front of them to provide four secure points of stability," she says, "before they attempt to use the poles in a more traditional Nordic walking style."

To facilitate stability for individuals in need, Buchanan has designed programs of seated and standing exercises using

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Mark your calendar

Join Tom Rutlin and Peggy Buchanan for a preconference workshop at the 2011 International Council on Active Aging Conference in Orlando, Florida. This workshop, “Creating ‘thriving’ Nordic walking and pole exercise programs,” will take place 9 a.m.–4 p.m. on Wednesday, November 30, at the Orange County Convention Center. For details or to register, visit the “Conference” section of the ICAA website, www.icaa.cc, or call ICAA toll-free at 866-335-9777.

the poles to improve these participants’ range of motion, balance and body awareness prior to their walking with poles. Some examples appear in her sidebar, “Five ways to create thriving pole walking programs for older adults,” on page 71.

Program experiences

Paula Hader, wellbeing coordinator at Cedar Ridge Apartments and Cedar Lake Village Homes in West Bend, Wisconsin, introduced walking pole programs to her residents in April 2009 with an educational session and a kickoff walk. These programs quickly became popular with residents interested in improving mobility and posture, according to Hader. She soon added balance and stability classes modeled after those created by Peggy Buchanan (available on DVD from www.walkingpoles.com).

Hader also began organizing regular outings on Cedar Ridge’s 50-acre setting and the Village’s 100 additional acres, as well as “mystery” walking trips to local area parks and to attractions (a program favorite). Today, regular pole walking

outings take place from May through October, with pole stretching classes held in the wintertime. In addition, to support ongoing participation, Hader encourages residents to do their pole walking in the community’s hallways and parking garage when the Wisconsin temperatures drop during the winter months.

Cheryl Bartholomew, director of fitness and lifestyle at The Jefferson, a Sunrise Senior Living Community in Arlington, Virginia, has used walking pole programs for the past four years. “I offer a pole walking class (called The Pacesetters) twice a week,” says Bartholomew. “The poles are also an integral part of my balance programs (basic and advanced) to build leg strength and develop core muscles, as well as tools for stretching effectively and safely.”

Bartholomew recalls that “many residents were at first slow to embrace the concept of walking with poles, particularly our independent living residents, who did not use walkers and canes.” So she began classes with just two participants. “[We] decided to do our ‘warm-up exercises’ in our lobby (near the coffee machines),” she adds, “hoping that the exposure would entice reluctant residents to try them. Very soon our numbers and the popularity of the walking pole programs swelled.”

A high-rise community, The Jefferson features twin towers, each 21 stories, boasting “long corridors that are ideal for pole walking,” Bartholomew notes. Similar to the Cedar communities, participants walk the corridors when the weather is not conducive to outdoor classes. Group members also climb the stairs to move up the towers (a technique Bartholomew learned at one of the author’s educational sessions), then take the elevators down. “Using the poles to walk up stairs is not appropriate for everyone,” she cautions, “but it can be a wonderful tool for many.”

In nice weather, The Pacesetters walk in a nearby park lined with park benches, “which makes it easy for residents with varying endurance levels to stop and rest at their leisure,” Bartholomew continues. “Currently, my regular group is comprised of 12 residents,” she says. “However, throughout the years, many Jefferson Sunrise residents have purchased their own poles, so they have the ability to walk on their own schedules.”

Building ‘buzz’

The very visible effects achieved by most pole walking and exercise programs, combined with the number of participants who integrate the use of poles into their activities of daily living, build “buzz” among older adults that helps these programs thrive. That buzz attracts growing numbers of participants to structured activities as well as to self-directed social group activities and individual practice, as Bartholomew, Hader and other professionals have discovered. These opportunities encourage regular health-promoting physical activity, often with the bonus of social interaction, for both motivated and “exercise-phobic” older adults. ☺

Tom Rutlin, BS, founder and CEO of Exerstrider Products, is considered to be “the father of Nordic walking.” An architect by training, Rutlin has been a creative pioneer in delivering age-friendly Nordic walking poles, a variety of pole walking and exercise programs, and motivating presentations for people of all ages and abilities. The internationally recognized fitness innovator has focused on working with older-adult populations for nearly a decade. More information about Exerstrider training courses, products, research and resources is available at www.walkingpoles.com.

Images courtesy of Tom Rutlin

Five ways to create thriving pole walking programs for older adults

by Peggy Buchanan, MA

Poles can be a versatile tool for creative exercise programming, in addition to being an effective alternative to traditional assistive walking devices. For those of you who aren't familiar with the many wellness/fitness-building pole walking and exercise programs, here is a quick introduction to just a few, along with tips to ensure participant safety.

1. Prequalify your participants.

The following special populations with balance challenges and altered gait should begin using walking poles to improve *stability* before addressing mobility, and should always get the approval of their healthcare provider before beginning:

- Less ambulatory older adults
- Multiple sclerosis
- Parkinson's disease
- Peripheral neuropathy
- Stroke
- Hip and knee replacement

2. Follow (and share) a few important safety tips.

- Never walk backwards using walking poles.
- Always keep walking pole tips outside your stride path.
- Avoid walking side-by-side in hallways and on narrow sidewalks. (You should always be a safe distance from others, both side-to-side and front-to-back, when walking with poles.)
- Always keep the poles in front of you, especially when walking up or down hills.

3. Offer a simple introductory session.

- Begin seated in an armless chair (chair arms will interfere with the range of motion of the activities).
- While lightly gripping a walking pole in each hand, move legs and

arms to the beat of the music, as if marching.

- Vary the marching pattern from narrow to wide steps and pole plants, allowing for ample upper- and lower-extremity warm-up. This challenges coordination of the footwork and pole plant before standing.
- Use the poles for stability and to aid the movement from sitting to standing, which adds both strengthening and balance components.
- Hold the poles with hands in the center of the shafts parallel to the floor, then lift the poles overhead and lean from one side to the other to develop improved upper-body range of motion (ROM).

4. Use poles for stretching and ROM programs.

- *Shoulders.* Seated or standing, hold poles horizontal to the floor at shoulder level with arms bent at elbows. Slowly extend both arms overhead until arms are straight, bend elbows, lower poles behind head, then return to overhead. Bring poles down to chest height in front, return to overhead. Repeat by lowering poles behind head, overhead and down in front to chest. (Note: Move through only comfortable ROM.)
- *Neck and trunk rotation.* Seated or standing, hold poles horizontal to the floor at shoulder level with arms bent at elbows. Slowly extend both arms overhead until arms are straight, bend elbows, then lower poles behind head. Gently rotate the torso, looking behind to the left and right for several slow repetitions.
- *Chest/shoulder ROM.* Sit or stand tall with shoulders relaxed, abdominals contracted, and arms held straight out to the sides parallel to the floor. Place both poles perpendicular to the floor and press down on them as you lean slightly forward. Stretch to one side

then the other by moving both poles to the left and then the right while leaning toward the poles at the side.

- *Hamstring stretch.* Sit or stand, one leg extended and ankle flexed, with poles planted in front of the body. Lean forward gently. Repeat several times with each leg.
- *Side stretch.* Stand sideways against a wall and hold poles in the outside hand. Cross the leg nearest the wall in front of the other leg as you take the hand holding the poles and reach across the body toward the wall.

5. Spice things up with a “pole dancing” class.

- Begin by addressing the proper height, posture and operation while using poles.
- Play music with a beat that is easy to follow, walking around the room for a warm-up.
- Address basic balance concepts while moving to music in a class lasting 30–45 minutes.
- Focus a portion of the class on learning some simple dance steps and creating a performance routine.
- End with a relaxation stretch segment for the finale.
- Have plenty of chairs on the sidelines for those who need to sit out a few routines and take a break. ☺

Peggy Buchanan, MA, is the director of fitness, aquatics and physical therapy at Vista del Monte active retirement community in Santa Barbara, California. Buchanan is also coordinator of the vitality wellness programming for Front Porch, a leading nonprofit senior service agency in southern California. She was named IDEA's International Fitness Instructor of the Year in 1997 and International Program Director of the Year in 2002. Buchanan was also a member of the International Council on Active Aging Visioning Board, which recently completed its term.