

Podcast Transcript: Portrait of the Senior Population

Barry: Welcome to Senior Care Corner. I'm Barry.

Kathy: And I'm Kathy. Thanks for joining us today!

Barry: You'll find us online at SeniorCareCorner.com with solutions, tools and information for families and other caregivers of senior adults.

We've got another information packed episode for you today. In our feature segment we'll look at just who our senior loved ones are, maybe help us understand a little more about what they face in their lives. We talk a lot about family caregivers and what we face in our own lives but it might be helpful to understand more about our older loved ones, those for whom we are caring.

But before we get there, Kathy, I believe you have some news items for us?

Kathy: Of course I do! Our first news item today:

New mobile app from National Institutes of Health helps women learn about their health in 52 weeks

(Barry this story is geared to all those caregivers who are women caring for everyone including themselves!)

A new mobile phone app that offers women access to a year's worth of practical health information from the National Institutes of Health is now available. It's called "52 Weeks for Women's Health" it's an easy-to-use app to help identify health risks for women and their families. It then can help them create plans and maintain healthy lifestyles throughout the coming years. It includes questions to ask health care providers, a glossary of health terms and health screening information. It also gives links to additional information sites with more coming in the future.

Some of the key features of this free app include a personal health section for recording your medications and medical history or disabilities, a journal feature, and a goal-setting.

Feedback on the program has been overwhelmingly positive according to the director Janine Austin Clayton, M.D. The free app is available for iPhone, iPad or Android applications.

Coming soon from the National Institutes of Health will be a similar app geared toward men.

Barry: That's very interesting Kathy. We'll have to take a look at that.

Kathy: I've already downloaded it on my iPad. It's got some great information on it!

Barry: Well good!

Kathy: Sharp as a Tack at 90: Here's why

Older adults who have not experienced memory decline were found to have specific brain characteristics that differ from those seniors who have age related memory loss according to researchers at Northwestern University's Cognitive Neurology and Alzheimer's disease Center.

Researchers have dubbed these elders "SuperAgers".

MRIs showed that the cortex of the brain of these SuperAgers was thicker than a comparison group of people over 80 years. The cortex is the outer layer of the brain involving memory, attention and other thinking abilities. A thinner cortex reflects loss of our brain cells.

SuperAgers' brains looked more like middle-aged controls who were 20-30 years younger.

Forgetfulness is a common complaint among elders and is thought to be a normal occurrence in aging.

Although this study shows the correlation between thicker cortex size and good memories in older adults, it doesn't discuss the cause and effect or how seniors can protect their brain volume. What is also not clear is whether anything can be done to become a SuperAger. Genetics certainly plays a role as well as a healthy lifestyle.

More to come on this subject in the future I think Barry.

Barry: I'll be looking forward to that.

Kathy: Alright, our third news item:

Cocoa May Sharpen Aging Brain

A new study shows that drinking one cocoa-rich beverage a day can help improve your brain health.

Seniors who already had mild cognitive impairment in memory, language, thinking or judgment were studied.

For eight weeks they were given cocoa-rich drinks containing either a low, medium or high amount of antioxidant flavanols. At the end of the eight weeks, they were tested on attention and other memory skills.

Those seniors who drank the medium and high antioxidant containing cocoa drink scored better than those who drank the low antioxidant cocoa.

While the data doesn't suggest that daily chocolate intake is recommended for seniors due to its high fat and high calorie content, but feel more research is needed to examine the effect

antioxidant flavanols in general have on cognition before an across-the-board diet change is suggested.

One physician states that moderate exercise three times a week will yield the same or increased benefits for improvement in mild cognitive impairments for seniors.

So Barry, here we are again back to move better for better aging. I think I will eat some chocolate when I take my walk...

Barry: I was going to say, I was wondering if you made that news item up so that you can say when you're having your chocolate that you're just having some "health food".

Kathy: It's stimulating my brain! Alright, our fourth and final news story:

Heart Health: How to Improve Your Heart without Vigorous Exercise

Seniors who don't have time (or possibly motivation) to go for a jog shouldn't worry according to a new study. It states that regularly participating in leisure and household activities such as gardening, brisk walking and housework can provide the enhancements to their health without the vigorous exercise.

Researchers studied people who regularly did these activities for a decade and concluded that elders who did these moderate activities gained heart health as well as those who did vigorous activity. The study encourages seniors to remain physically active which contributes to their successful aging.

They found that seniors in the study who went from inactive to active had a better inflammatory response indicating a lower risk for heart disease.

Another finding of this study seen over a period of ten years was that seniors appear to get more active in retirement. The rate of participation in moderate activity for the recommended period of 2.5 hours per week for improved heart health was 50% but after retirement it skyrocketed to 83%.

Barry, everything we read keeps telling us to get active and keep moving if we want to successfully and healthfully age. So everyone, let's get moving!

Barry: Well, when are you going to let me retire so that I can get active Kathy?

Kathy: Sooner, I hope!

Barry: Those are some great news items, as always Kathy. Thanks for sharing that with us.

You know, Kathy, we talk a lot about family caregivers and of course even just did our video "You Might Be a Family Caregiver" to help caregivers understand that they are in that role in order to encourage them to get support in meeting their own needs. Now lately we have been

talking about helping family caregivers better understand their senior loved ones. Sure, they're our parents and grandparents and we know them from that perspective, but many of us simply don't know them as people and especially as people who need our care.

As often happens, we found a great report that tells us a lot statistically about seniors in the US. Sure, our senior loved ones are individuals and we truly don't want to be lost in statistics. At the same time, learning about the statistics on seniors as a group can help us to better understand what OUR own senior loved ones are facing and what they may encounter with others in their own age group or when pursuing services to meet their needs.

We also have a second motivation for pursuing this line in a podcast feature here today. Regulars to Senior Care Corner know of our interest in technology and what it can do to improve the lives of seniors and the care we can provide them as family caregivers. It's what drives us to participate in the International CES, the huge electronics show, each January and bring tech information to our readers and listeners. In addition to informing family members, we see ourselves as advocates for the needs of seniors and family caregivers, pressing the technology developers and manufacturers to provide the products we need and to consider the specific needs of seniors when offering products that have multiple applications or benefits across demographic groups. By educating them about seniors, we hope to make them better able to provide those products and to see - - as we will discuss in a few minutes - - that the seniors of today and tomorrow, as well as their family members, are extremely capable of purchasing products from which they expect to receive benefits.

The report we came across is Older Americans 2012: Key Indicators of Well-Being. It's from the very official sounding Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, which means a group of US government agencies actually collaborated, surprisingly enough to us at least, bringing together their different perspectives to provide a broad picture of how older Americans are faring today and comparing it to those of the past.

The report covers many statistical areas, including population, economics and health. While we are going to report some of the numbers to you some of the numbers, we are going to take them a step further and weave them into a picture, not of the typical senior but of how different situations in which today's seniors find themselves and hopefully better help you better understand the situation in which YOUR senior loved ones find themselves.

Kathy: Well Barry, we've discussed before that the US Census found 40 million people aged 65 and over, who made up 13% of the overall population. While that's a lot of people, it might be helpful to have some perspective. The number of seniors has doubled in the last 40 years and will more than double over the next 40. That's really no surprise, because of the Baby Boomers, who started becoming seniors in 2011. Because of the boomers, 1 in 5 Americans are expected to be seniors by 2050; even more remarkable than that statement is that the 85 plus population numbered more than 5 million in 2010. That number will not double but more than TRIPLE by

2050, when there are expected to be almost as many in the 85 plus population as there were seniors overall just 40 years ago.

Barry: We have two purposes for giving you those numbers. First, seniors are already a large population group – and market – and only getting larger. When it comes to understanding how all the other statistics apply to our own loved ones we want to make it clear there are A LOT of seniors so we should expect there to be a lot of variety within the group. For family members, that means some of what we'll discuss may apply to your senior loved ones but a lot may not. For our tech audience, that means there isn't just one senior market with homogeneous needs and interests, any more than any other age group can be viewed as a homogeneous market.

Kathy: That becomes more clear when you look at more of the numbers on those seniors. We already knew that there are about a third more senior women than men. When you get to the 85 and older group, there are twice as many women as men. With that mismatch, it's no surprise to find that, while a majority of senior men are married, most senior women are not. In fact, in 2010 72 percent of senior men lived with their spouse while only 42 percent of senior women did. More than half of all senior women lived with other relatives or alone.

Barry: I was really struck by the number of women in the oldest age group, 75 and older, who live alone. Just about half of them do a number that has been consistent for 30 years.

Kathy: Many of those live successfully on their own but it surely points out the need for family caregivers in their lives where possible, even if doing so from a distance.

Barry: Well, let's turn to economics here Kathy. There is much being said about Social Security and its future, but it has truly made a difference to seniors. As recently as 1965 about one third of seniors lived in poverty. Since then, that number has fallen to only 9 percent of seniors. Moreover, the number of seniors in the middle and upper income levels has steadily increased to include almost two thirds of the total number of seniors.

Kathy: Barry, that sounds like many of our senior loved ones are better off than their parents might have been at the same age and that the older population has become a much better potential market for products. As good as these numbers are getting, though, it still means one in three seniors are in the low income or poverty groups, which means they may need our help to make ends meet - - as many family caregivers know only too well.

Barry: You're right, Kathy. Those numbers are good but could be better for those still on the lower end.

I was surprised to find that seniors are still doing so well and had really expected to learn that there had been some backsliding in the last few years with the downturn in the US economy taking a hit on so many portfolios. The report does reflect a significant drop in income from portfolios, but that drop started 20 years ago. That income has more than been replaced, though,

with income from employment. That's especially true for the seniors who are the best off financially. Contrary to the image of the most well-off older adults living off big stock portfolios, the seniors in the group with the most money get close to half of it from employment earnings.

Kathy: Looking elsewhere in the report, Barry, that earnings number seems to be in conflict with numbers elsewhere in the report that show seniors spend, on average, a small part of their days working. We know that many seniors work, many because they want to stay active but increasingly to supplement their other sources of income. On the upper end of the income scale there are surely a number of older professionals with significant earnings. Still, the large amount of earnings for seniors across the board may be an indication that more of them are living with family members, so that the family has earnings that are being counted as available to the seniors.

Barry: In addition to the income Kathy, these are the best educated seniors in history now that may contribute to the growing wealth reported in the study. Eighty percent of seniors today are high school graduates, a number that's grown each year. Close to one fourth are also college graduates. Beyond income, the tech industry should see that as an indication that a growing number of seniors are ready, willing and able to adopt technology products and solutions that they see as improving the comfort and quality of their lives. Of course, they should be seeing that in other statistics we've discuss in recent months, including over half of seniors being active online and a growing number using smartphones and other mobile tech devices.

Kathy: Before you get too deep into technology, Barry, let's come back to the picture of seniors we can draw from the report. We've talked about population and income, two areas showing positive trends, but what about health? That's one area where we expected to hear about challenges for seniors and family members, but also opportunities for improvement.

Barry: Well Kathy, the study found that 75% of seniors describe themselves as being in good to excellent health.

Kathy: Well that's a positive sign.

Barry: True, but we can't ignore the 25% who say they're in fair to poor health, a number that rises to more than one in three for those 85 and older.

Kathy: There are some troubling signs in the report as well. We talk a lot about the need for seniors to be active. Yes, that's true for all of us but even more important to their health and well-being. I find it worrisome that only 10% of seniors meet federal physical activity guidelines, which call for at least two and a half hours each week of moderate physical activity.

Barry: But that's a number which has been increasing each year.

Kathy: Yes, but we as family caregivers need to help our senior loved ones push that number upward. That's especially true of those over 85, only 4 percent of whom meet the guidelines. It's not as important that they have that level of activity as much as simply becoming active at SOME level to get their bodies moving.

Barry: Well the need for that activity is more clear when we look at the obesity numbers for seniors. As with the rest of the US population, seniors are increasingly overweight. Almost three fourths of all seniors are being classified as being overweight, with those 75 and older in slightly better shape than younger seniors. The picture is particularly alarming when you look at obesity though. Nearly 40% of seniors are obese, and that's double the percentage from 30 years ago. Those 65 to 74 are much more likely to be obese than those 75 and older, a relationship that has been consistent over time, though even those 75 and over have a much higher rate of obesity than they did 30 years ago.

Kathy: I suspect the difference between the age groups is at least in part a function of the health effects of obesity, which contribute to many not making it to 75 years old.

I agree that points to a need for more activity and probably also better eating habits and food choices. I wish the report had looked more at diet quality. They only showed one point in time so there is no basis for comparison, and the statistics they showed are mixed. While seniors do a good job at getting fruits and grains in their diets, they come up short – as does the population in general – when we look at vegetables and whole grains. Likewise seniors – and the rest of us – could be doing better when you look at the share of total calories from fats, alcoholic beverages and added sugars.

Barry: Great points Kathy. I know you could say a lot about diet. In fact, we ought to “interview” you as a dietitian in a future podcast.

Now there are some positive signs to report from the study, such as the number of senior women getting mammograms. While they once lagged younger women, seniors are now even more likely than younger women to get them and three times as likely as senior women were just 25 years ago. Seniors are now less likely as well to be cigarette smokers. Less than one in ten smoke today, and that's less than half the rate of those who were one generation younger.

Now these habits have certainly contributed to the lower rates of death for seniors from heart disease, cancer and stroke, with heart disease and stroke seeing remarkable declines over time. On the other hand, 50% more seniors die from Alzheimer's disease than just 10 years ago. As we often discuss, many more seniors and their family caregivers are dealing with the disease and these numbers are likely to increase as the population continues to age, at least until science finds a cure.

Kathy: What that means for now is that, as we often discuss, more family members will be caring for loved ones with Alzheimer's, meaning more support will be needed for seniors AND their family caregivers.

Barry: Now Kathy, there is a lot more information in the report that we could discuss, much of it on health conditions and the need for and cost of healthcare. To avoid a data overload in today's discussion though; we'll save some for reporting in future blog posts and maybe another podcast.

Before we move on to Kathy for today's quick tip, I want to summarize what we hope you get out of this information.

The senior population is significant and growing even larger and older. That makes it even harder to generalize about seniors, especially when we see not only their ages but also income levels, marital status, living arrangements, education and health vary significantly across the population segment.

Kathy: That also means the number of family caregivers is growing, especially when we see the growth in the number of the oldest seniors.

Barry: So true, Kathy. That means the audience for Senior Care Corner should be growing with the number of people who can benefit from the information and insights we provide. To those of you in the technology industry, we hope you see the number of seniors and their wealth as an indication of a profitable market that will only be growing in the future. Seniors – and their family caregivers – will have a growing need for tech that can help seniors stay active and improve their health. Of particular interest may be the numbers who live alone, which to us indicates a growing need for products and services that help them stay safe and healthy at home, including keeping them connected with healthcare providers, caregivers and other family members; especially those family members who live at a distance.

Well that's it for this feature segment, Kathy why don't you go ahead and wrap us up with a quick tip!

Kathy: Okay!

Tips to Keep Your Senior in the Driver's Seat Safely

The Hartford wants to keep drivers safely on the road for a lifetime and offers these tips to help you keep your senior safe.

1. Be a healthy driver-getting your senior's eyes checked, knowing effects of any medications, getting exercise regularly, and getting medical checkups will help be healthy behind the wheel.
2. Keep learning-reminders are helpful so have your senior attend defensive driver classes in your area; he may get a break on insurance.

3. Adjust to changes in skills as your senior ages-adjust driving as your senior's ability changes such as limit night driving, limit driving in busiest traffic at rush hour or long distance trips.
4. Choose a safe car that fits your senior-consider comfort and control.
5. Be sure your senior learns about their car's safety features so that he will be used them properly.
6. Keep your senior's car maintained following manufacturer guidelines.

Driving is a key to your senior's independence so help them keep them, their car and others on the road safe.

Barry: Great tip Kathy, thanks. Well folks, that wraps up this episode. We appreciate you joining us here. We hope you stop by SeniorCareCorner.com regularly. Sign up so that you'll get our updates. Of course we also provide information on Senior Care Corner over at Facebook. And of course, we've got a lot of great tips that come out on Twitter, so you might want to follow Kathy @SeniorCareCorner. Now the link to Twitter is right there on our webpage, so you can just follow her from there. Again, we thank you for joining us and we hope to see you next time and until then we hope everybody has a great day.