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They build muscle and friendships

By **Linda A. Moore**

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The participants in the SilverSneakers exercise classes at the Fogelman Downtown YMCA say the program gives them better health, happy spirits and a new place to make friends.

"We wouldn't take anything for it," said Peggy Watkins, 72. She and her husband, Billy Watkins, 72, were the first SilverSneakers class members at Fogelman Downtown YMCA.

Since signing up for SilverSneakers two years ago, they've both gotten healthier, she said.

Billy, a diabetic, is no longer on insulin and has lost weight.

Peggy feels better and has better posture.

"I'm wearing high heels again," she said.

SilverSneakers, a nationwide physical fitness program for seniors, has classes offered locally at all Memphis-area YMCAs.

The program is open to Medicare recipients, and their Y membership is paid by their Medicare supplemental insurance.

Only insurers HealthSpring and Humana in Tennessee and Humana in Mississippi and Arkansas cover SilverSneakers Y memberships. Arkansas Blue Cross and Blue Shield will join them January 1.

The beginner SilverSneakers classes at the Downtown Y have about 18 regulars, said instructor Cheryl Kent, 54, who was required to take a SilverSneakers training class in order to teach.

The classes offer some cardio work, lots of stretching and exercises that help older adults function, she said.

For example, they use a ball to mimic opening a jar and weights to strengthen muscles for reaching.

Kent teaches only SilverSneakers classes, but takes other classes at the Y.

There are differences, she said, in teaching younger adults and seniors.

"We pay more attention so they don't hurt themselves," Kent said.

That's why there are no exercises that require class members to bend over at the waist. Someone could become lightheaded and fall, she said. And balancing exercises are done with a chair within easy reach.

The pace is also easier.

"With young people, we might fall out trying to keep up with them," said Ruby Preyer, 66, who has been going to the classes for a year.

For more active seniors, an advanced class offers more cardio work.

But exercising is only part of what SilverSneakers offers.

It's also a social outlet. Birthdays and holidays are celebrated with cake and potluck lunches.

"Not only are they getting socializing, which is a great thing, they're also making new friends and caring about others and it fits in with the Y and our mission," said Sandy Becker, membership and marketing director and senior advisor for the Downtown Y SilverSneakers program.

Dollie Hearn, 61, lives Downtown and to "keep from staring at the four walls" she rides the trolley to the Y for classes at least twice a week.

"You get the pleasure of being with other people," she said.

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