EPISODE DATE: 5/15/12

EPISODE NAME: UVM Health and Nutrition Students Volunteer at the Champlain Senior Center

You can tell someone to eat vegetables five times a day and they’re not going to do it. Today on Across the Fence we’re going to visit a Vermont senior center that’s serving up healthy meals with a side dish of nutrition and health information served up by students from the University of Vermont. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us; I am Judy Simpson. For all of us one of the barriers to good health is a proper diet. For seniors in particular poor nutrition can lead to a host of health problems so at a recent luncheon at the Champlain Senior Center in Burlington UVM students volunteered their time to provide some one on one health and nutrition information. Across the Fence’s Keith Silva tells us more.

The noontime meal at the Champlain Senior Center in Burlington brings a healthy helping of food and friendship to the table.

Jacqueline ‘Jackie’ Blanchard: “Well, it gives you a chance to be out and to be with people. I think it’s intelligent really when you come right down to it, because when we get older let’s face it we lose it a little bit so therefore it helps to keep your mind active.”

Marcia Mason: “Because so many of us live alone and we don’t cook for ourselves, we don’t cook for ourselves very much and so you know it’s really important that we go somewhere where we can be provided with good nutrition and this is what the senior center does, you know, five days a week.”

Richard Kemp: “I’m a single person so I’m really cooking for myself and I really have to make conscious choices about what I eat and what I should be purchasing and cooking and the fact that there are other people talking about it and I can access those kinds of meals and see it. It’s helpful I think. And also … you really shouldn’t be eating by yourself; you should be eating with somebody else.’

Along with lunch, today’s menu includes a side of health clinics and nutritional information designed to help seniors live life on their terms.

Bonnie Campano: “The primary basis of a person’s ability to remain independent is their health and good nutrition is everything. If you have poor nutrition you can fall apart on every level,
physically, emotionally, mentally, but if you have good nutrition than you have a real fighting chance, there’s less likely a chance of you being injured in a fall or any disability, you heal faster, you have companionship and friendship when you eat with other people, emotionally it’s good for you to be doing this; and beyond that though is to really have our seniors remain aware and focused on their health.

Seniors could take advantage of blood pressure checks from students in the University of Vermont College of Nursing and Health Sciences and one-on-one nutrition consults with students in the UVM Masters in Dietetics Program.

Kelsey Gero: “One of the main issues is protein, a lot of older adults don’t get enough protein in their diet whether it be a meat source or a lean healthy plant protein, hydration tends to be an issue, not drinking enough, high salt content, a lot of times older adults will lose the ability to taste so they’ll add salt to things. The older you get the more chronic diseases.

Katy Lawson: “A lot of them have been coming up to us and saying I have a specific nutrition question, how can you help me, which has been great! I think it shows a lot of how proactive they are, and how they’re standing up and saying ‘hey’ I know that nutrition is a huge part of my life and it’s going to help me live a better quality of life, live longer, I can see my grandchildren and children more so really for them to have a better nutrition status or to just have questions about their nutrition really goes to show they care about their quality of life and that they care about themselves.”

Senior Center Executive Director Campano credits UVM for taking part in the health fair and for their enthusiasm whenever it comes to offering outreach.

Campano: “I think that the University is really committed. UVM is really committed to their community and we have tapped the nutrition program at UVM for a few years now and so we want to continue to do that.”

For the seniors at this health fair the feeling is mutual.

Blanchard: “You see when they have your blood pressure taken they have a little card where they write it down so when I went to the doctor I was able to give that to him so that he could see my progress or how I was doing. Keith Silva: “How, you doing Jackie?” JB: “Good! I’m healthy.”

Kemp: “I think a service to the community that the senior center is here and this health clinic is here because people don’t really go to the doctor unless there’s pain or something going on, but here you can do some preventative medicine kind of stuff, check your blood pressure and maybe find out if you are diabetic or not.”

Lawson graduates in May. She believes that participating in events like this balances her education with the real-life experience that she’ll need as a health professional.

Lawson: “I could sit there and tell someone eat vegetables five times a day and it’s not going to make them do it, it’s not going to give that personal connection and I think as a health care provider it’s very important to have that personal connection and the empathy toward your patient or client and understand what they’re going through and the challenges …
and it’s working with them to figure out the best solution for them that’s individualized to help them become healthier and better.

Its ‘fair’ to say that this event proves that there’s no age limit to living a healthy lifestyle. In Burlington, I’m Keith Silva with Across the Fence.

Thanks to the staff and participants at the Champlain Senior Center. Here in the studio I’m joined by one of the Master of Science and dietetics students, Katie Lawson also the program Director Amy Nickerson thank you so much for being with us. Katie tell us a little bit about your recent experience at the senior center?

Katy.: It was a great time. When we first got in there people were not exactly sure they thought we were people who did glucose readings so everyone kept asking us to poke their fingers but after we told them that we were here to answer any nutrition questions that they had I was quite impressed that they had so many questions. Some of the most common ones were can you tell me more about diabetes or how I can control diabetes or I've been recently diagnosed with diabetes. A lot of people had questions to what constitutes as a healthy meal so we talk to them about the USDA my plate tool and how using that to plan your meals to have lots of fruits and vegetables lean protein milk and dairy products in each meal.

Judy.: Do some of the seniors say that's more than I eat in and day.

Katy.: Yes some people did say that so we said we define what's right for them and if it's one meal you have protein and apple. That's the best you can do and that's perfectly fine and just tried to use throughout the day you as much as you can.

Judy.: What are some of the most common nutrition issues seen in older adults?

Amy.: There are a number most of them relate to simply not eating enough because part of the process of growing older is that people lose their appetite. They find it's a lot of work to prepare food and so in terms of the priority nutrition issues in general its overall calorie intake but also it's really important for older adults to focus on an adequate protein intake and calcium and vitamin D. I think we've undervalued the role of protein as we get older but there's a fancy term called sarcopenia which means the loss of muscle mass and muscle strength in older people. It has quite profound effects on their ability to live independently and I think we need to keep that in mind that all of this health and nutrition information is to promote quality of life for these older people as well as to help them live independently.

Judy.: You mentioned protein can you give me some examples of what would be a good protein for a senior?

Amy.: That's another good question. Protein can come from plant sources as well as animal sources and although it's very easy and a healthful approach to keep plant sources of protein to minimize intake of saturated fats. As we get older the body has a difficult time digesting protein and other foods as well and actually the animal sources of protein such as dairy lean dairy products any type of meat even red beef chicken fish and poultry those are all very good sources of protein and we shouldn't forget the value of the egg which has been maligned over the years as we shouldn't eat them but it's one of the most digestible sources of protein and an excellent low cost food source for older adults.
Judy.: So imagine if you're older adult and are having a hard time digesting something and the easiest thing is to cut it out of your diet.

Katy.: Right a lot of people do that.

Amy.: And older people will tend to eat less meat because of dental problems. They either have dentures or no teeth and so to think about eating a piece of meat is not something most people would do as they get older. But with different cooking techniques they can make a very tough piece of beef more easily chewed as well as digested.

Judy.: Let's talk a little bit about how older adults can improve or sustain their nutritional status.

Katy.: That's a good question. One of the easiest ways is probably eating with friends and family. Because when you gather in a social setting you tend to eat a little bit more so therefore you're increasing your calories. Another way is to just use snacks throughout the day sometimes it's the older adult who will eat their main meal either at lunch or maybe breakfast and have a lighter dinner so maybe focusing on having snacks regularly throughout the day that include a high protein source or dairy of some kind just up those calories.

Amy.: I'd also like to add and that being physically active is an important component of their overall nutritional health because what physical activity does for everybody but older people as well is an increase is your need for calories. You'll also stimulate your appetite and these are two areas that older people really have a tough time with. They lose their appetite just because of the process of aging. Social isolation will also interfere with your appetite and desire to eat but if they are physically active they will feel hungry and they will also be able to eat more calories because that's one of the other challenges with eating well as you grow older is that as you get older our fat mass increases and we lose lean muscle mass. Muscle tissue that uses calories at a much faster rate so the more muscle we preserve the higher our calorie needs are so there's a double advantage to being physically active. Do I mean going and climbing Camel's Hump no in fact the type of activity that's most beneficial for older people are activities I should say strength training because it's that resistance that's going to strengthen muscles as well as strengthen your bones and that's another issue but also balance. Tai Chi for example is a wonderful activity for older adults. They can do it in the comfort of their own home they can take a class or they can pop the video in and be guided through. But again thinking about what will promote quality of life and independent living is being able to be mobile and part of that mobility equation is not only nutrition but the strength and balance to get up and go.

Judy.: Let's talk a little bit about living alone because that was an issue that a couple of the folks we saw in the video brought up. They say I am alone so I really don't feel like eating.

Katy.: That is very commonly heard all throughout the day. My son and daughter see me once a week but other than that I'm by myself and I think that's one of the greatest things about the senior center and other community meal sites is that it does provide the social aspect and there's many ways that if seniors can't drive themselves there's public transportation or SSTA will come and pick you up. But I think that's one of the things that people should know about as they get older as an option that they have to combat eating alone.

Judy.: Is it hard to a certain extent as well as far as getting in the habit of eating well?
Amy.: I think it's a pattern that we develop over a lifetime and I think there's been a tendency to think that as we grow older our needs are less. But I like to think that the nutrient needs of older adults are greater because it's the challenge of still getting a lot of nutrients with fewer calories. The other comment I'd like to go back to is that sometimes for older people the meal in the middle of the day is their only meal if not their main meal. Meals are served at community meal sites where congregate meal sites by design are intended to provide at least 1/3 their daily needs but knowing that it is likely the sole meal of the day for these older people it provides much more than that one 3rd.

Judy.: Which is why it's so important. What other food assistance programs are available to older adults?

Amy.: In addition to the Older Americans Act nutrition programs which is the home delivery meals as well as the community meal sites there are senior farmer’s market programs that will be ramping up in the next couple of months. That's where seniors can get vouchers to go to a farmers market or certain housing facilities don't get a CSA share that community supported agriculture program. There's also a program called the commodity supplemental food program. It's very similar to the WIC program for older adults who get a packet of food every month and it is intended to be a supplement although many people use it as their mainstay.

Judy.: I want to thank you both for joining me today and talking about this really important issue. That's our program for today; I'm Judy Simpson will see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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