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## SIXTY PLUS

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### **Telecommunications plan allows seniors to exercise at home but not alone**

By Barbara Leitenberg

We all know that exercise is important -- especially for older people who may have gotten out of the habit. But how do you develop or re-develop the habit? There is no lack of classes in the Burlington area, either commercial or nonprofit; but these require a trip out of the house when it's raining or snowing. Vermont weather provides an easy excuse to miss a class. Of course, you can exercise at home, just walking or using written directions or following a program on television or on videotape; but this can be lonely. It is difficult to preserve the discipline of regular exercise without the stimulus of other people.

Now comes an idea that combines the best of these two approaches and eliminates the excuses inherent in each: exercise in your own home with a two-way television hook-up that allows you to see and be seen and communicate with an instructor and other people in your class. You can have the social benefits of a class without leaving your own television room. Ge Wu, associate professor at the University of Vermont's department of physical therapy and Larry Keyes of Microdesign, a technical consulting company based in Colchester, have joined their interests and expertise to develop a home-based exercise program for seniors via telecommunication. Wu conducts research into preventing falls by elderly people. She notes that fall-related damage, including hip fractures and head injuries, are the leading cause of unintentional injury and death among Americans 65 and older. Vermont ranks 45th out of the 50 states in its high percentage of fall-related deaths for persons 85 and older. From 1998 to 2000, falls cost Vermont almost \$45 million in hospital charges alone. Wu tries to help older people avoid falls by improving their balance and coordination through group exercise; but the dropout rate is high, she says. People cite parking difficulties and bad weather as reasons for not coming to class, making her research into the best ways to prevent falls "unfruitful."

Keyes describes himself as "the box and wires guy." He is interested in perfecting a device for two-way visual and audio communication that would be cheap and easy to use for both health-related and other purposes -- equipment as easy to use as a telephone. He notes that advances in technology during the past few years have increased the practicality of these ideas.

Wu and Keyes have received a grant from the National Institute on Aging to test how well their device works and how people respond to it. They are looking for volunteers to take a telecommunications exercise class geared to improving balance and preventing falls. The class would use Tai Chi, a traditional Chinese martial art, that involves "gentle, smooth movements, suitable for people in old age," says Wu. "It improves flexibility and strength in the lower

extremities and improves coordination." Each participant will be able to see and hear the instructor, ask questions, and receive suggestions about his or her performance. Wu and Keyes are looking for people 65 and older, preferably those who have concerns about their balance and fear falling. The class would begin in January and run for 15 weeks, three mornings a week. A second session with a new group of volunteers will start immediately after the first one.

People expressing interest will first be interviewed about their concerns about falling and their history of falls. Then Keyes will visit them to assess the space available for the exercise and discuss the installation of the telecommunications unit. Participants must have a high speed internet connection at home or live in the Adelphia or Verizon service area. The project will pay for all installation and monthly cable charges.

Barbara Leitenberg writes about senior issues biweekly. For more information about services for elders, call the Champlain Valley Agency on Aging at (800) 642-5119.

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