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Wellness Workshop Empowers Seniors to Make Healthy Choices

by Source staff

March 30, 2007 -- Seniors gathered Friday at the Divi Carina Hotel and Resort to learn the latest on health and wellness during a conference hosted by the Department of Human Services. Presenters from various medical fields talked to the elderly residents about taking responsibility for their own health. This was the second annual wellness workshop for seniors sponsored by the department.



Nurse practitioner Yvonne Washington Turay (right) speaks with a senior about aging gracefully.

While heart disease, cancer, stroke and diabetes continue to be among the leading causes of death, the seniors were told that making healthy changes will extend their life expectancy. Also important is getting proper information from one's primary care physician, eating healthy and engaging in physical activity.

The day began with seniors up on their feet, dancing and singing to Patty Labelle's "I've Got a new Attitude" and Sister Sledge's "We are Family." Almost all of the approximately 200 people in attendance joined in, and those who had trouble standing and dancing waved their arms and clapped their hands.

"Exercise is good for the bones," Senior Citizens Affairs (SCA) Administrator Eva J. Williams said. "If you move a little more maybe

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you won't hurt so much."

Assistant Administrator Murlene Van Beverhoudt opened the program encouraging seniors to make a commitment to live a healthy life by making good food choices, be physically active and take prescribed medicines according to their doctor's instructions.

Human Services Commissioner Chris Finch talked about relieving stress. "If we carry our burdens with us all the time it will come too heavy to bear, he said. Put down your burdens and rest a while."

Still looking youthful at 50, nurse practitioner Yvonne Washington Turay presented a talk centered on aging gracefully. The reason people are still dying prematurely from cancer, heart disease, stroke and diabetes is because people do not educate themselves and have an unwillingness to change their lifestyles, she said.

"Eat more fresh fruits and vegetables. Eat fish at least twice a week, and get 20 to 30 minutes of exercise three times a week," Turay said, adding that people who exercise have fewer accidents.

Turay touched on the delicate subject of HIV/AIDS in the senior population. There are 100 seniors in the Virgin Islands who have been diagnosed with the deadly disease. She said she recently treated a 74-year-old woman who had full-blown AIDS. Loneliness can cause seniors to make bad choices, she said, adding, much to the delight of the audience, that seniors can enjoy a healthy sexual relationship well into their 80s and beyond.

Following up on the theme of the day, Dr. Leticia Henry schooled seniors about bad cholesterol and good cholesterol. "Does an avocado have cholesterol?" she asked the crowd. Various answers could be heard throughout the crowd. Henry explained that if a food does not have a liver it does not have cholesterol. "Information changes as more research is done," Henry said.

People believed that avocados contributed to high cholesterol but now that school of thought has changed due to additional research, she said. Avocado has fat and calories, she said, but no cholesterol.

She cautioned attendees not to consume too much coconut, pointing to the current controversy over the saturated fats in coconut oil. "Cut back until we know more," she said.

"Trying to eat healthy is a challenge," Henry said, "because the foods you know and love, like fungi, dumplings, provisions are being advertised as bad for you. But you have to find out how much you can eat, because too much of anything is not good. Those foods have kept your ancestors healthy for decades."

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Many seniors take health risks because they are unaware of the dangers posed by the interactions of certain drugs, said Dr. Celia Victor. Even herbal drugs are not safe for everyone, especially when mixed with certain prescription drugs. "Natural doesn't always mean safe," Victor said.

Victor, who is the clinical compliance director for Human Services, explained that some drugs cause adverse interactions when mixed with green vegetables, herbal teas, some fruit juices and even garlic.

She urged seniors to have only one primary health care physician to ensure all the medicines they are prescribed work well with each other. Take your medicines in the proper dosages, she said.

The practice of some seniors of breaking pills in half to save money is potentially dangerous because it could cause a toxic reaction from a pill that is designed to dissolve over time in your system, she explained.

Victor told the seniors their health is in their hands and cautioned them to observe some standard rules for taking medication: Be informed; take your medicine until the doctor tells you to stop; if you have an adverse reaction to any medicine, stop taking it and consult your doctor immediately; store your medicine correctly; don't take expired drugs and don't share medicine with your friends or family.

The conference began at 10 a.m. and went until 2 p.m. Seniors left feeling more informed and empowered and many pledged to adopt a more healthy life style.

Back Talk

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Brief: Christian Featured in PBS Broadcast on Elder Care

Dr. Cora Christian, the prominent V.I. physician who serves on the National Board of the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), will be seen nationwide Wednesday as part of a panel discussion following the documentary "Caring for Your Parents." The broadcast event premieres locally at 9 p.m. Wednesday on WTJX Channel 12.

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