

Healthier thanks to activity trails?

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Fall prevention in the community.

Physical activity promotes lifelong health. Particularly later on in life, abilities and skills relevant to everyday life are improved by exercise. The health reports by the Association of the Robert Koch Institute in 2009 questioned over 2,000 people on their levels of physical activity. The study revealed that more than 2/3 of all people aged 65 and over are neglecting to follow physical activity recommendations (5 days or more for at least 30 minutes of activity, where you break into a sweat or become out of breath). Furthermore, the number of inactive people aged 18 and above is increasing with time. In addition, life expectancy goes up with every year: Those born in 2000 are expected to live to an average of 75 and 81 for men and women respectively. For the year 2050 the German Federal Statistical Office calculates an average life expectancy of 81 for men and 87 for women. In addition, prognoses forecast that in 2030 every third German citizen will be over 60 years old.

Consequently, it is important for older people, in several respects, to get sufficient, suitable forms of exercise. Because an increase in physical activity directly leads to an increase in good health and life expectancy (Wiesmann et al. 2004) and can, at the same time, help to decrease the risk of falling. Falls amongst older people are often followed by serious social, psychological and health-related effects. A number of risk factors for falls occurring are being examined and confirmed by means of studies. These include, among others, weaknesses in balance, reduced muscular strength in the lower limbs, gait disorders, multimедication (four or more medications) and being over 65 years old (AGS et al. 2001), and also the fear of falling itself. Special offers and programmes are able to counteract these in a targeted way, reduce the risk of falling and guarantee personal independence. Increasingly, so-called activity trails are also being built in local surroundings, which have been specially designed for older people and their exercise requirements. The idea and concept of the activity trail originated from China, and, in Europe, Spain, Portugal and Finland are taking pioneering roles. In Germany, in 1999, the first trail was built in Lower Saxony. Meanwhile, there are different manufacturers offering varied trails, some of them for generationspanning usage, others for more active senior citizens or just beginners. Expected effects of these trails are, from a physiological point of view, a mediumterm increase in strength as well as an improvement in mobility, coordination and stamina. In addition, possible adjustments to general, everyday physical activities and an improvement in quality of life by means of moderate requirements and high simulative nature. Ideally, it also reaches out to older fellow citizens who would be more likely to find exercise and the equipment daunting.

The goal of the project "Gesund bleiben – Gesünder Leben" ("Stay healthy – live healthy") of the Hessian Social Ministry is to scientifically evaluate, among other things, the effects of two reference trails in Hanau and Darmstadt.

The activity trails being used for this investigation of inactive people over 60 have been specially designed for older people and their fitness requirements. In close cooperation with the Sports Association of the State of Hessen, the Department of Sports Medicine at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, the Faculty of Social Sciences and Social Work of Darmstadt University for Applied Sciences and the Faculty of Landscape Architecture at the Rhein Main University of Applied Science are studying the subjective and objective changes as a result of 3 months of usage. In the course of the preparticipation evaluation, all evaluation participants received information and recommendations on the operation of the equipment as well as recommendations on frequency, duration and intensity of sensible usage of the activity trail. Altogether, 120 participants train on the activity trail, both in instructorled training as well as individual. Once a week fitness helpers offer the chance to gain instructorled practice. These course leaders trained by the Federal Sports Association are qualified to help physically inactive people to lead a physically-active life by advising and supervising them. In addition, subjects are recommended to use the trail by themselves once or twice a week. By means of the identical before and after measurement, changes to a fear of falling, physical activity, health-related quality of life as well as coordination skills, balance and strength are measured.

The scientific data leads to a guideline of action for the implementation of activity trails and, at the same time, serves a purpose for local authorities and health insurers in making their minds up, with an interest in environmental preventative measures. As a result the aim is always to promote the introduction or reintroduction into the adoption of an active lifestyle. For this reason, there is an increased likelihood of reaching a healthy age, as it has been proven that your quality of life goes up with adequate physical activity and the risk of many illnesses can be reduced.

PRACTICAL EXAMPLE – HANAU

