

# Teaching "Old Dogs" New Tricks Can Be Good For Them



By Ruth Kava — August 16, 2017



Supposedly, you “can’t teach an old dog new tricks”. Hard to know if that became a meme based on experience, or based on a lack of interest in learning new tricks. In either case, it’s probably been applied to older people without much justification. And some researchers set out to show that it isn’t applicable — at least concerning mobility in older folks.

Led by Dr. Jennifer S. Brach from the University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a group of investigators tested the efficacy of timing and coordination exercises for improving walking in older, community-dwelling adults. These people lived in independent living facilities, or senior apartment buildings, or attended senior community centers. Their testing protocol focused on walking exercises designed to improve the timing and coordination of ambulatory movements in a program called “On The Move” (OTM). The results of this program were compared to those of usual care exercise programs for older adults, which involved seated exercises to improve functional and walking ability. The [results](#) <sup>[1]</sup> were published in *JAMA Internal Medicine*.

Participants were mostly women, with a mean age of about 80 in each group — 152 took part in OTM, while 146 received the usual instructions. All of them received warm-up, strengthening and stretching exercises, while the OTM participants also received instructions and practice in stepping and walking (timing and coordination) patterns. There were 32 sites involved in this research — half were randomly assigned to usual care programs, and a half to the OTM program.

The exercises were scheduled to continue for 12 weeks — with two 50-minute sessions each week. More of the usual care participants (65 percent) attended at least 20 of the 24 scheduled sessions than did the OTM participants (50 percent). In spite of that, those in the OTM group did demonstrate a small but significantly greater improvement in mobility than did the usual care group.

These results are important because maintenance of physical activity as one ages is crucial for overall health. And because, in the older adult, any enforced immobility, such as that which stems from hospitalization, can quickly result in deteriorating physical abilities and tend to speed the transition to a dependent type of living facility.

What these researchers have shown is that it is possible to teach old dogs new tricks — the next important question is how long they will continue to practice them.

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[1] <http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/2648743>