

SilverSneakers® Fitness Program: Monitoring health status with the SF-12v2® Health Survey



Background

Launched in 1997, the SilverSneakers® Fitness Program was created to encourage older adults to increase their level of physical activity, and has succeeded in a big way: It's the nation's leading fitness program aimed exclusively at older adults. The program is run by Healthways, a provider of health and care support solutions based in Nashville, Tennessee.

Healthways contracts with fitness centers and YMCAs around the country, enabling members of partnering Medicare health plans to enroll in SilverSneakers for free. Members can participate in a choice of SilverSneakers group exercise classes that are designed to improve strength, range of motion and cardio functioning, and are taught by certified instructors. They can also work on their own, and have access to all the amenities available at their participating facility.

The average age of SilverSneakers members is 73, with 18 percent ages 80 and over, including some centenarians. Testimonials from SilverSneakers members such as Phyllis Budick confirm the program's impact.

"I no longer need glucosamine for my knees — they stopped hurting!" Budick wrote. "I walk up and down stairs much easier now. The exercise and socialization are also wonderful for my husband, who has Alzheimer's."

But anecdotal evidence alone will not necessarily convince health plans to offer SilverSneakers to their Medicare members. "Health plans don't want to buy a service that has no demonstrated results," says Mary Ferron, Vice President, Health & Economic Outcomes at Healthways. "They need to know they're choosing benefits that are not only appealing to their members, but that also deliver results. It's been critical to have data to demonstrate the impact of the program."

Challenge

The growth of SilverSneakers is due largely to Healthways' ability to prove the program's effectiveness to health plans by monitoring the health status of participants on an ongoing basis. To accomplish this, Healthways uses a comprehensive questionnaire that incorporates the SF-12v2® Health Survey. Developed by QualityMetric Incorporated, now part of Optum™, the SF-12v2 captures reliable and scientifically valid patient-reported health outcome information.

"We're very interested in learning how becoming more physically active affects both the physical and mental health status of SilverSneakers members," says Ferron. "We collect this information with the SF-12v2 and have longitudinal data that we report back to the health plans on an annual basis."

SilverSneakers mails its survey annually to upwards of 20 percent of its enrollees. "That's approximately 3,000 members of each health plan per year," says Ferron. "It's a large sample, and we get a 40 to 50 percent return rate. We always sample new members as well as members who have been participating in SilverSneakers for some time. That enables us to capture baseline data on our new members and longitudinal data on existing members. The same members sampled initially get surveyed again annually. But if we only collected information from the same individuals over many years, the sample size would dwindle. So every year, we've got new people coming in, as others become part of the longitudinal analyses. This gives us plenty of data."

Results

Healthways evaluates the functional health status of its members when they first join SilverSneakers, as well as how that status changes over time. Healthways then shares the outcomes with participating health plans.

"As a result of the SF-12v2, we've learned that the socialization component of SilverSneakers has had a huge impact, because we see very high functional mental health status among our members that does not decline with age," says Ferron. "Our program is designed not only to provide an opportunity for older adults to stay physically active, but to interact with their peers and create new friendships. That's important, given the high rate of depression in older adults and the losses they often experience. This support has had a huge impact, and SilverSneakers members have very strong mental health status scores. Two-thirds of our members have multiple chronic conditions, such as heart disease and arthritis, yet their physical health status scores don't decline as you would expect. That's why we know SilverSneakers is an effective program for managing the health of a population. This kind of information sends an important signal to the health plan that SilverSneakers is, in fact, helping manage the health and well-being of its members."



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—Phyllis Budick,
SilverSneakers participant

Health plans are getting the message. In 2004, SilverSneakers was made available to more than 1.4 million Medicare members by 31 health insurance providers in 18 states, through a network of more than 740 participating locations. Today, SilverSneakers is available to over 4 million Medicare members. The program is offered by 29 independent health insurance providers, as well as such national organizations as AARP, United and Humana, which offer SilverSneakers in multiple markets. The program has expanded to 49 states and Puerto Rico, through a network of more than 2,800 participating locations.

Why it works

The SF-12v2 and related products (including the SF-36v2® and SF-8™ Health Surveys) are widely recognized as the leading assessments of general physical and mental health status. Used throughout the world by health plans, disease management and pharmaceutical companies, health care providers and government agencies, they measure physical functioning, role limitations due to physical health, bodily pain, general health perceptions, vitality, social functioning, role limitations due to emotional problems and mental health.

“The SF-12v2 is a well-validated instrument,” says Ferron. “We also have access to national data through the Medicare Health Outcomes Survey of members from Medicare Advantage plans across the country. So we can demonstrate what a profile of our SilverSneakers members looks like in terms of health status and compare that with the national data on seniors in general.”

Moving forward

As SilverSneakers continues to expand, the SF-12v2 remains an essential part of Healthways’ annual survey. “I recommend the SF-12v2, especially for functional health status when you don’t have clinical data from the member,” says Ferron. “In our case, the SF-12v2 provides vital information that we can compare with national data from the Medicare Health Outcomes Survey. This adds to our credibility when we’re talking with our health plans. The SF-12v2 is an instrument they recognize and believe is credible.”

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—Mary Ferron, VP, Health & Economic Outcomes, Healthways

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