

SPONSORED

[Global Edition](#)
[Population Health](#)

Encouraging seniors to flex their brains and social muscles

Medicare Advantage plans can differentiate supplementary programs by addressing cognitive health and social interaction.

By:

Optum

December 05, 2022
10:19 AM



Photo: kali9/Getty Images

Reading, writing and playing games in later life could delay the onset of dementia by up to five years.¹ Social isolation and loneliness are associated with a 50% increase in dementia risk, a 29% increase in heart disease risk and a 32% increase in stroke risk.²

Findings like these serve as a call to action for Medicare Advantage plans to add brain health and social connection features to their ancillary wellness services, according to Brett Hanson, Head of Market & Product Development, Optum Health Solutions.

Brain exercises

When brain training is included in wellness programs, seniors can exercise mental muscles as well as bodily ones. “These programs can help members move the cognitive fitness needle forward. To do this, health plans need to go beyond just typical brain games like Sudoku and crossword puzzles and actually offer retention programs that help improve aspects of cognition such as memory, attention, focus and brain speed,” he explained.

With personalized programs, members can choose activities that target specific cognitive skills. In addition, members can proceed at a comfortable pace as difficulty levels increase and decrease in response to their actual performance levels.

Social concerns

To stay healthy, seniors also need to interact socially. Unfortunately, many find themselves isolated. “For many seniors, their kids have grown up and moved out of the house. For some, they may be living in different parts of the country. This type of social isolation has always been a factor. Coming out of the pandemic, though, there is even more isolation and a greater need for interaction,” said Hanson.

Health plans can help by matching members with local social clubs and events based on their interests. To meet the diverse interests of seniors, plans should have a range of activities including arts and crafts, dance, gardening, knitting, painting, drawing and sewing.

In addition, plans can up the social quotient by introducing fitness programs that integrate personal interaction. “Working up a sweat is one way that seniors want to increase their wellness. They’re also interested in sleep seminars, cooking clubs, attending guest lectures or learning about the newest health trends. To meet those demands, health plans can offer a wide variety of free health events where members can interact with each other,” said Vince Pozinski, Head of Government Product, Optum Health Solutions.

Digital options

While brain training programs naturally lend themselves to a digital environment, health plans should feature virtual social interaction possibilities as well. These alternatives are especially attractive to seniors with mobility issues.

Health plans can also integrate personal interaction into online physical fitness programs by incorporating social interaction features. According to Pozinski, when analyzing such programs, health plan leaders should ask:

- Does the digital solution have two-way opportunities for an instructor to see the members via camera, communicate with them and provide feedback through the workout or class?
- Are there features that allow members to include friends or family members to join them in their digital fitness workout?

Leaders should make sure that members are aware of online options and that these programs are easy to access.

“Awareness, enrollment and ongoing engagement will likely not meet expectations unless health plans invest in their marketing efforts,” Pozinski concluded. “It is also challenging [for members to interact virtually] if solutions are provided across multiple vendors that each have different digital experiences, enrollment experiences, member IDs, apps and customer service support. Health plans would be wise to seek out one vendor that can curate various products, tools and features in a single member experience.”

References

1. Wilson, R., et. al. August 2021. Cognitive activity and onset age of incident Alzheimer disease dementia. *Neurology* 97 (9): e922-e929.
doi: [1212/WNL.00000000000012388](https://doi.org/10.1212/WNL.00000000000012388).
2. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. 2020. *Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <http://doi.org/10.17226/25663>.

Topics:

[Mobility](#), [Patient Engagement](#), [Population Health](#)