

Research About – Aging

CIHR

The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) is the Government of Canada's agency for health research. CIHR's mission is to create new scientific knowledge and to catalyze its translation into improved health, more effective health services and products, and a strengthened Canadian health-care system. Composed of 13 Institutes, CIHR provides leadership and support to nearly 12,000 health researchers and trainees across Canada.

Through CIHR, the Government of Canada invested approximately **\$136.7 million** in 2007-08 in aging-related research across Canada.



The Facts

- Canada's population is aging quickly. The proportion of Canadians over 65 years of age rose to 13.7% in 2006, almost twice what it was when the baby boom began in 1946.
- There are now more than 4 million Canadians aged 65 years or older. By 2015, the number of seniors will surpass the number of children in Canada for the first time. If projections hold true, by 2031 there will be approximately 9 million Canadian seniors, compared to 6 million children.
- Canadian life expectancy hit a record high of 80.4 years in 2005, up from 80.2 in 2004 and 77.8 in 1991.
- In 1997, more than three quarters of seniors living at home viewed their health as good, very good or excellent, while only 6% reported their health as poor.
- Health Canada estimates one in three seniors will fall at least once this year. About 20% of injury-related deaths among seniors can be traced to a fall.

(Sources: Statistics Canada, Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Health Canada, Canadian Council on Social Development)



CIHR IRSC

Canadian Institutes of Health Research
160 Elgin St., 9th Floor
Ottawa ON K1A 0W9
Toll Free: 1-888-603-4178
www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca



Finding Solutions

Winners never quit, but they get old quicker

In what comes as comforting news to slackers everywhere, a Canadian study concluded that winning isn't everything. Sometimes abandoning a dream – especially an impossible dream – is healthier. CIHR-funded researcher Dr. Carsten Wrosch of Concordia University co-led a study that found striving for the unachievable leads to higher levels of the inflammatory molecule C-reactive protein which has been linked to diabetes, heart disease and early aging. However, Dr. Wrosch doesn't believe people shouldn't aim high – just that when a goal becomes unattainable they should find a more meaningful one. *The New York Times Magazine* included Dr. Wrosch and co-author Dr. Gregory Miller of the University of British Columbia in its 7th Annual Year in Ideas feature.

Study links antipsychotics to dementia deaths

A CIHR-supported study has linked the use antipsychotic drugs by older adults who have dementia with an increased risk of death. The Institute of Clinical Evaluative Services (ICES) tracked Ontario residents 66 years of age and older with dementia for 180 days after they started taking the drugs. The six-year study found slightly higher death rates among seniors who took either older typical (also called conventional) antipsychotics or newer atypical antipsychotics. Dr. Sudeep Gill, ICES Adjunct Scientist, said the severity of the outcome and the study's relatively short follow-up time means even slight mortality increases are significant, especially given that for many elderly dementia patients "these medications may not be very beneficial."

Bilingual bonus: a delay in dementia

Researchers with Toronto's Rotman Research Institute have found evidence that bilingualism may yield an additional benefit: delaying the onset of dementia for four years. The researchers studied diagnostic records of 184 patients with cognitive complaints between 2002 and 2005. The investigators found that the onset of dementia symptoms was 71.4 years for monolingual patients and 75.5 for bilingual patients. "There are no pharmacological interventions that are this dramatic," said CIHR-supported researcher Dr. Morris Freedman.

The Researchers

Dr. Brenda Vrkljan – Helping Seniors Stay Road Worthy

Will having the latest voice-prompted Global Positioning System (GPS) in your car make seniors better drivers?

According to Dr. Brenda Vrkljan of McMaster University, when it comes to helping older Canadians drive safely, she says there are more questions than answers about the role of assistive technologies in the car.

"Technology is not a panacea for helping older drivers. We need to know more about how seniors drive," says Dr. Vrkljan, an occupational therapist and CIHR-supported researcher. "For example, does the technology help them focus on the road or is it in itself a distraction?"

As baby boomers become seniors, helping elderly Canadians stay road worthy has become a significant health research challenge. Driving helps keep older Canadians independent, linked to services, and socially connected, especially in rural areas lacking public transit. Losing the ability to drive is associated with depression and even early death in seniors. Yet, the elderly also have a high rate of vehicle collisions and related injuries as compared to other drivers.



Her research is challenging the stereotypical view of the "backseat driver". During interviews with senior couples she found that "co-pilots" play a critical role in navigation and road awareness.

"Elderly drivers stated that navigating as a team is important, especially in an unfamiliar environment," says Dr. Vrkljan.

As a new researcher, Vrkljan says she's excited to be part of the CIHR-funded Canadian Driving Research Initiative for Vehicular Safety in the Elderly (CanDRIVE) team.

Through these collaborations she's partnering with psychologists, geriatricians, family doctors, and seniors groups to tackle questions that have important applications in the lives of older Canadians - even down to the type of car they drive. She's developing a car-buying checklist for seniors that will help them pick a vehicle that's right for them – with or without GPS.



For more information, go to
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