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# Recommendations

## PUBLIC HEALTH MANDATE

There is only one provincial requirement specifically targeted for seniors. It currently addresses falls in the elderly. Peel Public Health also addresses medication use through a campaign that relates to risk factors for falls and related strategies for prevention. The other injury prevention requirements address all age groups and not the senior population specifically. The provincial public health mandatory program requirements are currently under development by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care and Ministry of Health Promotion. The addition of a more comprehensive seniors' component within the new provincial requirements would be beneficial to the improvement of seniors' health.

The following are recommendations to help public health better address seniors' health.

## TO IMPROVE GENERAL HEALTH, DECREASE OBESITY AND ITS RELATED HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Obesity in seniors has been linked to both poor health and inactivity. In 2003, half of all seniors in Peel were overweight or obese, 58% of seniors reported being physically inactive. Although research appears to indicate that obesity does not have an effect on life expectancy for the older population, it does have a strong impact on the probability of becoming disabled. Overweight individuals develop an increased risk for several health conditions. Research shows that seniors will eat a healthy diet when nutritious foods are available. Strategies which address both an increase in physical activity and access to inexpensive, easily prepared healthy foods are necessary.

### Recommendations

That public health staff:

- Investigate and design program initiatives to promote healthy eating and physical activity for Peel seniors by
  - Collaborating with parks and recreation departments and other community organizations and agencies to promote senior friendly recreational facilities and encourage physical activity in seniors.
  - Collaborating with community agencies and businesses to improve access to lower cost healthy eating for seniors who are still living in the community.

### Facts:

- 58% of seniors in Peel reported being physically inactive.<sup>95</sup>
- 50% of seniors in Peel were overweight or obese.<sup>95</sup>
- 53% of Peel seniors ate fruits or vegetables five or more times per day (the recommended amount).<sup>95</sup>

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- Consumption of a variety of healthy foods in appropriate portions is important in maintaining a healthy weight.<sup>45</sup>
  - Overweight and obese individuals are at increased risk for several health conditions including Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancers.<sup>48</sup>

## To Reduce Injuries

Injuries among seniors are a major public health issue for seniors. An important factor to consider is that injuries in seniors can lead to an irreversible decline in function, institutionalization and even death. Women have higher hospitalization rates than men for both injury and falls.

In 2003, falls were the leading external cause of emergency room visits, hospitalizations and deaths in Peel among individuals aged 65 years and older. Some of the most effective methods of preventing a fall and its related injury are through the modification of the environment, review of medication, and increase in physical activity and education.

### Recommendations

That public health staff:

- Investigate and design program initiatives to promote safe environments for Peel seniors by
  - Increasing the reach of fall prevention initiatives;
  - Developing multi-disciplinary collaboration among urban planning, roads and transportation jurisdictions to ensure safer roads through improved design and increased driver re-testing and retraining;
  - Surveying the community yearly to identify other injury prevention issues for seniors in Peel;
  - Advocating for increased vision testing for seniors.

### Facts:

- One in three Canadian seniors will experience a fall.<sup>96</sup>
- More than 10 Ontarians are hospitalized from falls on stairs or steps daily. Ontarians 60 years and older account for three-fifths of these falls.<sup>97</sup>
- Causes of falls are:
  - an unsafe environment,<sup>94</sup> and
  - personal factors (e.g., medication or substance use, poor vision, balance).<sup>94</sup>
- Further research is needed on other injuries in seniors.

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## TO REDUCE THE ADVERSE EFFECTS OF SUBSTANCE USE

Alcohol is the drug most often used by seniors. As people age, their bodies metabolize alcohol more slowly. Even small amounts of alcohol can negatively affect some older adults' health. Alcohol adversely interacts with over 150 medications commonly prescribed to seniors. Alcohol-related diseases reduce a person's lifespan.

Over the counter or prescription medications can also cause harmful interactions when used together. Some may cause serious medical conditions. Many seniors take numerous medications, which increases the chances of incorrect medication use, harmful interactions between medications and adverse effects that can have serious health consequences.

Providing education and raising awareness among seniors of the possible drug interactions is integral to promoting a healthier lifestyle.

### Recommendations

That public health staff:

- Partner with pharmacists, drug retailers and other health professionals to address the issue of poly-pharmacy by surveying local seniors to:
  - Better determine the incidence of poly-pharmacy among Peel seniors;
  - Develop harm reduction strategies to raise awareness and educate seniors about the risks of drug interaction (including herbal products), correct dosing and expired medications;
  - Advocate for a yearly medication review for all seniors;
  - Advocate for one-stop shopping for prescription and over-the-counter medications.

### Facts:

- The proportion of low-risk drinkers was higher in seniors (65%) than in the general population aged 20 and older (51%).<sup>95</sup>
- Approximately half of Peel seniors reported they were regular drinkers.<sup>95</sup>
- Although 54% of Peel seniors are former smokers, only 6% currently smoke tobacco while 40% never smoked.<sup>95</sup>
- In Canada, more than one quarter of female seniors reported taking at least five types of medications compared with only 16% of male seniors.<sup>98</sup>
- Taking more than one drug multiplies the chances of incorrect medication use, harmful interactions between medications and adverse effects that can have extremely serious consequences.<sup>32</sup>

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## TO IMPROVE DENTAL HEALTH

Access to dental care is dependent on the ability to pay for dental services through dental insurance or personal funds. The social determinants of health also have a significant impact on seniors' oral health with factors such as poverty, access to adequate nutrition, and social supports all playing important roles. With rising dental costs, lack of dental insurance, and many costs for these services being out of pocket, many seniors on a fixed income cannot afford appropriate dental care. More than half (58%) of Peel seniors reported that they had seen or talked to a dentist or orthodontist in the past 12 months. Seniors face dental health challenges such as dry mouth and less salivary protection against germs due to medication use, as well as darker teeth and receding gums. Poor oral health may be linked to general health conditions such as diabetes, heart diseases, strokes and lung disease. Compromised dental health can also impact the ability to chew food and obtain adequate nutrition.

### Recommendations

That public health staff:

- Advocate that dental health be accessible to all seniors through the provision of universal dental insurance, with an interim measure of funds available to pay dental fees similar to the current Children In Need of Treatment public health program.
- Educate and raise awareness of the importance of good oral health care and its relation to good overall health by
  - Developing health promotion strategies to promote and raise awareness of the importance of good oral health for health-care providers in long-term care as well as the senior population in general;
  - Working collaboratively with Health Canada's Chief Dental Officer on local dental health initiatives;
  - Developing a community survey to determine the scope of the problem.

### Facts:

- Persons 65 years and older are seven times more likely to be diagnosed with oral cancer than younger individuals.<sup>19</sup>
- Oral health is important for seniors. Poor dental health and diabetes can lead to infections and ultimately heart attacks, strokes, lung disease.<sup>19</sup>
- Seniors face dental health challenges such as dry mouth and less salivary protection against germs due to medication use, as well as darker teeth and receding gums.<sup>19</sup>
- Poor oral health can lead to loneliness and isolation which can lead to serious mental health problems.<sup>19</sup>
- Less than half of Canadian seniors have annual dental checkups.<sup>99</sup>

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- 60-90% of home-bound seniors report a need for dental services, though only 26% report visiting a dentist at least once every two years.<sup>19</sup>
  - Only 9-25% of seniors in long-term care facilities have seen a dentist once a year, 30-78% have not visited a dentist in five years.<sup>19</sup>
  - 58% of seniors in Peel reported that they had seen or talked to a dentist or orthodontist in the past 12 months.<sup>95</sup>
  - Only 36% of seniors in Peel and Ontario reported they had dental insurance.<sup>95</sup>

## **TO DEVELOP HEALTHY COMMUNITY URBAN PLANNING**

Seventeen per cent of Peel seniors live alone and most live in detached houses followed by apartments. Almost half of seniors report they have arthritis or rheumatism diagnosed by a health professional. Forty-eight per cent of female seniors need assistance with some kind of daily tasks. The senior population has a somewhat higher prevalence of low income compared to the general population.

The design of our communities can have a significant impact on the health and well-being of the senior population. Many seniors spend a good portion of time in their neighbourhoods where they tend to participate in social and recreational activities in local facilities such as libraries and parks. Those without a car need easy access to shopping, medical professionals and other facilities. Public transportation also needs to be easy to board for people with decreased movement.

### **Recommendations**

That public health staff:

- Join a multi-sector collaboration: health, community and social programs and urban planning to advocate for planning, designing and building communities that
  - Are safe and accessible to the senior population;
  - Enhance inter- and cross-generational interaction to reduce social isolation;
  - Allow increased pedestrian access to promote physical activity.