It seems like a no-brainer. Offering fitness programs to seniors for a reduced rate — or even free — is a win-win. Aging retirees stay healthier, which curbs health care costs.

Healthways’ SilverSneakers fitness program — offered as part of a free or discounted perk by many health insurance companies — serves 13 million older adults at 13,000 facilities nationwide. In the Dallas-Fort Worth area, nearly 260 fitness and wellness centers offer many SilverSneakers classes tailored to adults 65 and older.

The SilverSneakers Splash class at the Finley Ewing Cardiovascular and Fitness Center in North Dallas has been a godsend for Terry Brewer of Plano. Bad discs in her lower back left her in a lot of pain.

When she retired from Blue Cross Blue Shield in 2010, she immediately started the SilverSneakers program. Chair yoga and water aerobics “have really helped keep me relatively pain-free. It’s been wonderful,” she says. “After being in the water and seeing how much easier that is on my body, I don’t do a lot of walking on land anymore.”

Classes range from water aerobics to cardio. For more active baby boomers, there is the Boom program. Key partners in the Dallas area for these classes include 24 Hour Fitness, Anytime Fitness, Crunch Fitness, Gold’s Gym, Curves, LA Fitness, Youfit, YMCA of Metropolitan Dallas and YMCA of Metropolitan Fort Worth, she says. SilverSneakers Flex activities — including Latin dance and bootcamps — are offered at 2,000 additional U.S. locations, including local parks and recreation centers.

“We have members who are newly retired and those who are celebrating their 100th birthday, and we have fitness offerings that accommodate this spectrum of fitness levels and preferences,” says Joy Powell, chief operating officer of Network Solutions at Healthways, which offers health and fitness solutions and support, including the SilverSneakers program.

“Many people also use the program to reach a health goal, from running a marathon or being able to stop taking diabetes medication, to losing weight,” she says.

Annette Karp of Addison suffers from arthritis and has a bad shoulder, but knows her three-times-a-week trek to the Aaron

By KATHLEEN GREEN
Special Contributor

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Terry Brewer (left), who started the SilverSneakers program after retiring from Blue Cross Blue Shield in 2010, says chair yoga and water aerobics have eased her back pain.
Annette Karp (center) says her SilverSneakers cardio workout at the Aaron Family Jewish Community Center in North Dallas makes her “feel better all over.”
Family Jewish Community Center in North Dallas makes her “feel better all over.”

Class instructors go through SilverSneakers training to become certified, says Marilyn Harris, who teaches SilverSneakers Splash classes at the center. Having that knowledge helps teachers understand their clients’ needs, including typical aches and pains of aging, so they can help them achieve better strength, balance and overall fitness.

She says her certified training through SilverSneakers, as well as continuing aquatic education, means factoring in seniors’ relevant limitations — a recent hip replacement or lower back pain, for instance.

“If I know somebody has low back pain, we may not do a whole lot of jumping up and down, or we’ll do a march rather than a jog,” she says. “That’s why the water is so great. You have much less impact on your joints.”

As Harris, 55, makes an effort to praise those in her class not only for their in-class efforts but also for just showing up, she also challenges them with exercises that stimulate and strengthen both mind and body.

“I love it when they get out of the pool and tell me, ‘I wasn’t going to come today but now I feel so good.’ Just to think that you improved somebody’s day and you got them out of their house, and they feel better from having exercised,” she says.

Karp, 71, swears by the SilverSneakers cardio class. She comes for the aerobic dance, weights, stretching and balancing, but the ’50s and ’60s music is her favorite part.

“I know I feel much better than if I didn’t exercise,” says Karp, who is a retired office manager from the UT Health Science Center in San Antonio. “And even the days when I feel lazy, the thought of the good music, I think, ‘I’ve got to go listen to the good music.’”

That’s a recurring theme among SilverSneakers participants. Not only do they feel better, but many have experienced a noticeable improvement in their health.

High blood pressure and raised blood sugar readings were the norm for Bien Pammit of North Dallas. But since he started a regular routine with the SilverSneakers program at the JCC last fall, those high levels are now within normal range.

“That’s why I started coming to the community center,” says Pammit, 77, a retired comptroller. “I thought that was the best way to get rid of the symptoms. I think I’m getting to the point where I may be able to get rid of them.”

Eileen Alberto of Lake Highlands believes that because she was so fit from her Splash and yoga classes with SilverSneakers, she was able to pull through a recent battle with ovarian cancer.

“It was really crummy, but I think I did as well as I did because I was so fit, which is good,” says Albert, 79. She was encouraged by her newfound SilverSneakers friends, who sent her get-well cards as she recovered. She is
back in class now to regain her strength and be around her uplifting classmates.

“You can’t sit around,” she says. “You’ve got to start moving again.”

Friendship is one aspect of SilverSneakers that was unexpected yet is celebrated, says Powell with Healthways.

“So many of our members tell us that their SilverSneakers class is like a second family to them,” she says. “Every day people thank us for this program and tell us how it is so much more than an exercise program — it is a community of friendship and support that changes their lives.”

A tightknit water aerobics class at Finley Ewing meets once a month to celebrate people who have birthdays that month, says Brewer. And a friend in her water aerobics class throws an annual Christmas party for classmates.

“Everybody cares about each other,” she says. “With most of us being over 65, there’s a lot of comparing of ailments, doctors and medications. We trade recommendations for good doctors and find out about symptoms you hadn’t thought about.”

That link between fitness and emotional well-being was recently confirmed in Healthways’ annual participation survey of SilverSneakers members, Powell says. More than 37 percent of participants are there to socialize; 68 percent come to class with a friend; and 34 percent attend with their spouse or significant other.

“I have met some nice ladies in there, who actually asked me if I had a nice time on my vacation,” says Karp, who found out about SilverSneakers from a friend in Florida. A quick check of her own insurance revealed that she, too, was eligible.

The SilverSneakers program, dreamed up by founder Mary Swanson after her own father exercised to regain his health after a heart attack, is offered through many health insurance companies, which notify members of the SilverSneakers fitness option. Members submit their 16-digit membership number to fitness centers that offer SilverSneakers classes. More eligibility information can be found at silversneakers.com.

“We’ve seen how boomers want to continue the active lifestyle they are accustomed to and are turning to fitness to make sure they can continue to enjoy their retirement years,” says Powell.

Pammit, who works out at the Jewish Community Center every day, can’t imagine spending his retirement on the couch. The SilverSneakers program really fits the bill.

“It keeps me busy sometimes instead of just taking a nap all the time or watching TV,” says Pammit, who knows that exercising is key to his overall health.

“There are a lot of people who can hardly move at my age.”

Kathleen Green is a freelance writer who lives in Plano.
Bien Pammit says his blood pressure and blood sugar readings have fallen since he started participating in a cardio aerobics class last fall at the Aaron Family Jewish Community Center in North Dallas.

SILVERSNEAKERS IN TEXAS
If you’re part of a group retirement health plan or have Medicare Advantage or Medicare Supplement Health, you may qualify for SilverSneakers. According to the SilverSneakers website, these Texas health plan providers offer benefits:
- Advantage by Superior HealthPlan
- AARP Medicare Supplement Insurance Plan
- Amerigroup
- Blue Cross Blue Shield of Texas Careist Health Plan
- Humana
- UnitedHealthcare
- WellCare
For more information about SilverSneakers’ eligibility and membership, visit silversneakers.com or call Healthways at 866-584-7389.

CLASSES
SilverSneakers offers a broad range of classes and venues for members of all levels. For more information on the program, including advice on nutrition, fitness and stress management, visit healthwaysfit.com.

CLASSIC
Classic classes include:
- **CardioFit**: A safe, low-impact aerobics class that’s good for the heart and achy joints.
- **Classic**: Various exercises set to music increase strength and range of motion.
- **Circuit**: A standing circuit workout that increases cardio and muscular endurance.
- **Splash**: Shallow-water aerobics for improved flexibility, cardio, strength and endurance.
- **Yoga**: Seated and standing poses that can be adapted for people with limitations. Increases balance, flexibility and range of motion.

BOOM
Boom classes are available for more active adults and include:
- **Move**: Cardio endurance through a dance workout.
- **Muscle**: A combination of strength-focused moves and cardio.
- **Mind**: A mix of stretching and mind focus through Pilates and yoga.

FLEX
Flex includes community outreach at neighborhood parks, churches, recreation centers, senior living centers and more. More than 70 kinds of fitness classes are offered, including:
- Walking groups
- Yoga
- Indoor/outdoor boot camp
- Latin dance and more.