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For immediate release

Lack of Physical Activity Contributing to "Super-Sized" Older Adults

(College Station, TX. September 22, 2003): A good deal of national attention has focused on the epidemic of childhood obesity in the United States, and certainly it is a serious public health concern. But children are not the only group suffering from the consequences of enormous portions of food, high fat snacks, and sedentary lifestyle. "Too much food and too little physical activity is contributing to an epidemic of "super-sized" older adults in the United States," says Marcia Ory, Ph.D., MPH, director of the *Active for Life*[®] National Program Office at The Texas A&M University System Health Science Center.

October 1, 2003 is the International Day of Older Persons, and Ory sees this as an opportunity to focus awareness on the importance of engaging in healthy behaviors, including physical activity.

According to U.S. government surveys, 27.1 percent of adults age 50 - 64 are obese and 19.8 percent of adults 65 and older are obese. "Over the last ten years we have seen an alarming increase in obesity among all adult age groups," Ory notes. "Among adults age 50 to 64, the number of people who are obese increased from 16.9 percent in 1991 to 27.1 percent in 2001."

"If you look at other health behaviors, specifically physical activity, you begin to see an even grimmer picture -- 60 percent of adults are not engaging in enough leisure time physical activity. And older adults are the least active of all Americans," says Ory. "The irony is that we know regular physical activity can help people maintain ideal body weight, as well as help prevent or control other chronic diseases including heart disease, hypertension, arthritis, and some types of cancer."

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data show that one in three adults older than 65 report no leisure time physical activity, and more than one in four adults age 50 to 64 report no leisure time activity. The U.S. Surgeon General recommends moderate physical activity for 30 minutes a day on most days.

According to the CDC, "Research has shown that healthy lifestyles are more influential than genetic factors in helping older people avoid the deterioration traditionally associated with aging. People who are physically active, eat a healthy diet, do not use tobacco, and practice other healthy behaviors reduce their risk for chronic diseases and have half the rate of disability of those who do not."

With funding from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Ory is heading up *Active for Life*, an initiative based at Texas A&M's School of Rural Public Health. *Active for Life* is integrating programs that have been proven effective in helping older adults become more active into community settings such as churches, hospitals, senior centers and fitness centers.

"People understand they need to be more active," comments Diane Dowdy, Ph.D., deputy director of the *Active for Life* program. "Yet the majority of people remain sedentary. We hope to learn how a group-based behavior program and a telephone-based coaching system might be used to help motivate mid-life and older adults to increase the amount of physical activity they do."

The *Active for Life* program is being implemented in community settings in California, Illinois, Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Michigan, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Texas.

"People don't need to wait for the outcome of our program to get active," stresses Ory. "There are excellent resources that can help, including the AARP's *Keep Active: Get Moving at 50 Plus*, the Administration on Aging *USA on the Move* program, the American Heart Association's *Just Move* and *Choose to Move*." Other resources suggested by Ory that offer good information on physical activity for midlife and older adults include The National Institute on Aging, the American College of Sports Medicine and the American Association for Active Lifestyles and Fitness. She also suggests that organizations wanting to address issues related to physical activity and older adults can find information from the Active Aging Partnership. Information on connecting with these resources is available through the *Active for Life* web site www.activeforlife.info.

"There are a wealth of excellent programs," notes Dowdy. "The hardest thing is getting motivated to begin a program." She offers five tips to help people get started.

1. Find an "exercise buddy" and set a regular time and place for activity. It can be as simple as agreeing to meet before work for a brisk 20 minute walk each morning.
2. You don't need to spend a lot of money to get more active. Just put on a comfortable pair of walking shoes and take a walk in your neighborhood or in an area shopping mall.
3. You don't need to spend a lot of time. Just 30 minutes a day of moderate activity on most days of the week is all that is needed to get health benefits.
4. Set realistic goals. If a person has been inactive, they should not begin a fitness program by starting to jog for 30 minutes daily. Go slow. Set a goal such as walking for ten minutes at a time, three times each day. Or make some simple changes in daily routines like looking for the farthest away parking space rather than the closest to the store or office.
5. Don't get discouraged. It is easy to get off track with an activity program, especially when it is not yet part of a daily routine. If you get off track -- you just begin again.

"Observances like the International Day of Older Persons, which was established in 1990 by the United Nations General Assembly, can become trite," says Ory, "or we can use them as opportunities to launch new, positive health habits!"

The Texas A&M University System Health Science Center School of Rural Public Health is the first school of public health to focus on the often-unique health issues and needs of rural populations. The mission of the School of Rural Public Health is to improve the health of communities with emphasis on rural and other underserved populations, through education, research, service, outreach and creative partnerships. The School is part of The Texas A&M University System Health Science Center. Texas A&M is the only land-grant institution in the state of Texas.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, based in Princeton, N.J., is the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and health care. It concentrates its grantmaking in four goal areas: to assure that all Americans have access to quality health care at reasonable cost; to improve the quality of care and support for people with chronic health conditions; to promote healthy communities and lifestyles; and to reduce the personal, social and economic harm caused by substance abuse – tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs.