

# SENIOR LIFESTYLES

## Fitness expert's 'pillow talk' helps prevent falls

By Mike Latona  
Staff Writer

PENFIELD — Betty Perkins-Carpenter has a mission. If you'd like to join her cause, it would be wise to come armed with a pillow.

"I'm going on a crusade to get America pillow-dancing to the Tennessee Waltz," Perkins-Carpenter declared.

Perkins-Carpenter is not a professional dance instructor. Nor is she an advertising rep for a pillow distributor. She's a renowned fitness expert, and pillow-dancing is one of her leading techniques for preventing serious injury in a fall.

Perkins-Carpenter travels the United States giving lectures on fall prevention. In addition, her 1989 book, *How to Prevent Falls - A Comprehensive Guide to Better Balance*, is in its fourth printing.

Perkins-Carpenter explained that practice-dancing with a pillow allows people to walk sideways, in circles and backwards with greater confidence. They also gain better balance by switching the pillow from hand to hand, she said.

"People are not afraid to walk backwards. It changes their attitude from 'I'm getting older, I can't do this'. They say 'I can do this' — and that is such a difference," Perkins-Carpenter said.

She added that other items can be substituted for pillows, saying, "If you have to do it with a vase of flowers, you can do that, too."

By holding onto such an object, she explained, you remove one of your balancing stabilizers (a free arm) and your balance point changes. The next step is to get your legs into the act to help maintain balance, she said.

Without such exercises, she said, seniors may become so worried about injury that their lifestyles are affected. "People are afraid to leave their homes for fear of falling," she said. "They think, 'If I fall, I break my hip. If I break my hip, I go to the nursing home. And if I go to the nursing home, it's bye-bye.'"

Perkins-Carpenter said that toes play a key part in maintaining balance. She explained that when toes are spread out, a body balances itself better than when they're bunched up. Therefore, Perkins-Carpenter said,



John Powell/Photo Intern

Betty Perkins-Carpenter demonstrates "Dancing with Your Pillow," an activity that helps seniors to improve their balance as well as one that provides a good cardiovascular workout, at her home in Penfield on May 6.

seniors should be very careful about their footwear.

"If you can't spread your toes wide, then buy new shoes," she emphasized.

Perkins-Carpenter said she also tries to impress upon people the need to relax their bodies if they begin to

fall. Though she is against drinking, she compared such a situation to a drunken-driving accident.

"A stiff body breaks and a limp body bends. Someone who was drinking and in an accident doesn't get hurt because he's relaxed," she explained.

Perkins-Carpenter promotes body suppleness, not through alcoholic beverages, but through her pamphlet *Stretching in Bed*. This 14-step guide offers various daily stretching exercises for seniors.

Among Perkins-Carpenter's recent lectures was an April 27 appearance at Bath Presbyterian Church, sponsored by the Steuben County Office for the Aging. Perkins-Carpenter's demonstrations — which included the pillow dance — made an impression on Margaret Arquette, a parishioner in the Holy Family Catholic Community.

"She was excellent," Arquette said of Perkins-Carpenter. "She has things to share with people in such a positive, wholesome way."

Arquette, 68, noted that she cares for many senior citizens in her community. "I know I'm going to share what I learned," she remarked.

Perkins-Carpenter said she hopes that children and grandchildren of senior citizens take this topic seriously as well. She explained that if a family member falls, that means increased caretaking and visits to health-care facilities for everyone.

Perkins-Carpenter, 69, is a former Olympic diving coach and consultant to the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. She was inducted into the Frontier Field Walk of Fame in 1999.

She founded Perkins Swim Club in 1959 and operated it until 1986. In addition, she began Fit by Five for preschoolers in 1969, and the program is now used in five states. She also founded two other businesses, Senior Fitness Productions Inc. and Child Fitness Productions Inc.; and teaches a fitness-for-the-aging course at St. John Fisher College.

"There's too much to do. I hope, God willing, there's a lot more years to do it," the energetic Perkins-Carpenter said.

EDITORS' NOTE: For information on ordering *How to Prevent Falls* or *Stretching in Bed*, call 716-586-7548.

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