The Columbian

Camas residents Helen and Jay Elder — with their dog, Wesley — have incorporated numerous complementary medicine techniques into their daily lives. (Steven Lane/The Columbian)

By **Marissa Harshman**, Columbian health reporter
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If You Go

- What: Clark College Mature Learning Program spring symposium.
- When: 9 a.m. to noon April 1.
- Where: Clark College at Columbia Tech Center, 18700 S.E. Mill Plain Blvd., Vancouver.
- Cost: $10.
- Registration: ecd.clark.edu/mature-learning/index.php or 360-992-2939.

When Helen Elder retired eight years ago, she and her husband, Jay, decided to make their health their No. 1 priority.

They were overweight, had high blood pressure and needed cholesterol medications, among several others. They didn't exercise and they were eating a "typical American diet" of too much processed, packaged foods, Helen Elder said.

They relied on traditional health care; they went to their health care providers when they were ill, took prescribed antibiotics and medications.

They were reacting to their health issues, Helen Elder said.

"I learned that we need both sides of our medical system," she said. "But most of us don't know much about the other part of our health care system."

The Camas woman, who is now 62, said she realized that alternative, complementary medicine was just as important to her health as traditional medicine.

She sought community education classes about alternative medicine. She found a naturopathic physician who helped her to understand the underlying causes of inflammation and develop a bio-individual nutrition plan, an eating plan based on Elder's individual biochemical needs. She also started seeing a chiropractor who got Elder and her husband started on a daily walking regimen.

"My husband and I, as a result of that, are daily walkers," Elder said.

Elder also regularly sees an acupuncturist for anxiety and stress reduction. She does yoga for flexibility and balance and for pain relief in her lower back. She sees a therapist for acupressure-type treatments for pain relief from ongoing back spasms and a physical therapist for injury prevention.

"It's proactive," Elder said. "My husband and I see ourselves as taking control of our health."

Elder was so invigorated by her improved health that she approached the Clark College Mature Learning Program about creating classes focused on alternative, complementary medicine. The college was receptive. Two such classes — Take Control of Your Health and Agility, Mobility and Tranquility — begin this spring.

Complementary medicine is also the focus of the Mature Learning Program's spring symposium April 1.

"This is just a new chapter, bringing new vibrancy to a program like ours, which has always been a leader in offering health-related topics," said Tracy Reilly Kelly, Mature Learning Program manager.

This year marks 42 years of the program designed for people 50 and older. The program offers a variety of classes, including numerous health and fitness classes.

One popular class series, Aging and the Brain, got Elder thinking about the changes in ability as the brain ages. It also encouraged her to take preventive action, to continue to grow as she ages.

"I don't have to wait to get dementia just because my dad died from dementia at 75," Elder said. "There's so much that I can do about my health."

And Elder isn't alone in those thoughts.

"As people age and they begin to experience in greater force the effects of disease and disability, the standard medical practice is to offer a number of medications," Reilly Kelly said. "People are very aware that a lot of medications have side affects. You hear people say, 'I wish I could decrease the dose or not need so many medications.' "

"Complementary medicine does have an answer to that," she added.

The spring symposium will explore complementary medicine and highlight natural medicine therapies and treatments, fitness and mind-body connection. The keynote speaker is Dr. Marcus Miller, an associate professor at the National College of Natural Medicine who is trained and certified in traditional and naturopathic medicine.

The goal is to educate and enable people to take control of their health — no matter their age.

"We believe that individuals can easily take on the tools for making good decisions for their health and about their lives, but education is key," Reilly Kelly said.