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**Midlife fitness staves off chronic disease at end
of life, UT Southwestern researchers report**

DALLAS – Aug. 27, 2012 – Being physically fit during your 30s, 40s, and 50s not only helps extend lifespan, but it also increases the chances of aging healthily, free from chronic illness, investigators at UT Southwestern Medical Center and The Cooper Institute have found.

For decades, research has shown that higher cardiorespiratory fitness levels lessen the risk of death, but it previously had been unknown just how much fitness might affect the burden of chronic disease in the most senior years – a concept known as morbidity compression.

“We’ve determined that being fit is not just delaying the inevitable, but it is actually lowering the onset of chronic disease in the final years of life,” said Dr. Jarett Berry, assistant professor of internal medicine and senior author of the study available online in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*.

Researchers examined the patient data of 18,670 participants in the Cooper Center Longitudinal Study, research that contains more than 250,000 medical records maintained over a 40-year span. These data were linked with the patients’ Medicare claims filed later in life from ages 70 to 85. Analyses during the latest study showed that when patients increased fitness levels by 20 percent in their midlife years, they decreased their chances of developing chronic diseases – congestive heart failure, Alzheimer’s disease, and colon cancer – decades later by 20 percent.

“What sets this study apart is that it focuses on the relationship between midlife fitness and quality of life in later years. Fitter individuals aged well with fewer chronic illnesses to impact their quality of life,” said Dr. Benjamin Willis of The Cooper Institute, first author on the study.

This positive effect continued until the end of life, with more-fit individuals living their final five years of life with fewer chronic diseases. The effects were the same in both men and women.

These data suggest that aerobic activities such as walking, jogging, or running translates not only into more years of life but also into higher quality years, compressing the burden of chronic illness into a shorter amount of time at the end of life, Dr. Berry said.

According to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), adults should get at

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least 2 ½ hours of moderate to intense aerobic activity each week to ensure major heart and overall health benefits.

UT Southwestern has a partnership with The Cooper Institute, the preventive medicine research and educational nonprofit located at the Cooper Aerobics Center, to develop a joint scientific medical research program aimed at improving health and preventing a wide range of chronic diseases. One of the world's most extensive databases, the Cooper Center Longitudinal Study includes detailed information from clinic visits that has been collected since Dr. Kenneth Cooper founded the institute and clinic in 1970.

Other UT Southwestern researchers involved in the study include Dr. David Leonard, assistant professor of clinical sciences, and Ang Gao, a biostatistical consultant in internal medicine.

The study was funded with support from the NHLBI and the American Heart Association.

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