

Longitudinal Changes in Health

Main take-home points from this Coffee Break:

- 1) Physical and cognitive changes are a normal part of aging, and are distinct from disease or frailty.
- 2) There is a large range of health and functional ability as people age
- 3) Lifestyle factors are a key player in health over time (e.g., health behaviors like smoking and exercise)

Illustrative Study:

A **Normative Aging Study** published in *Psychology and Aging* highlights the individual differences in **physical and psychological health trajectories**. The study was authored by Carolyn Aldwin, from the Department of Human and Community Development, University of California, Davis, with Avron Spiro III, Michal Levenson and Ana Paula Cupertino. The following figures are from the study.

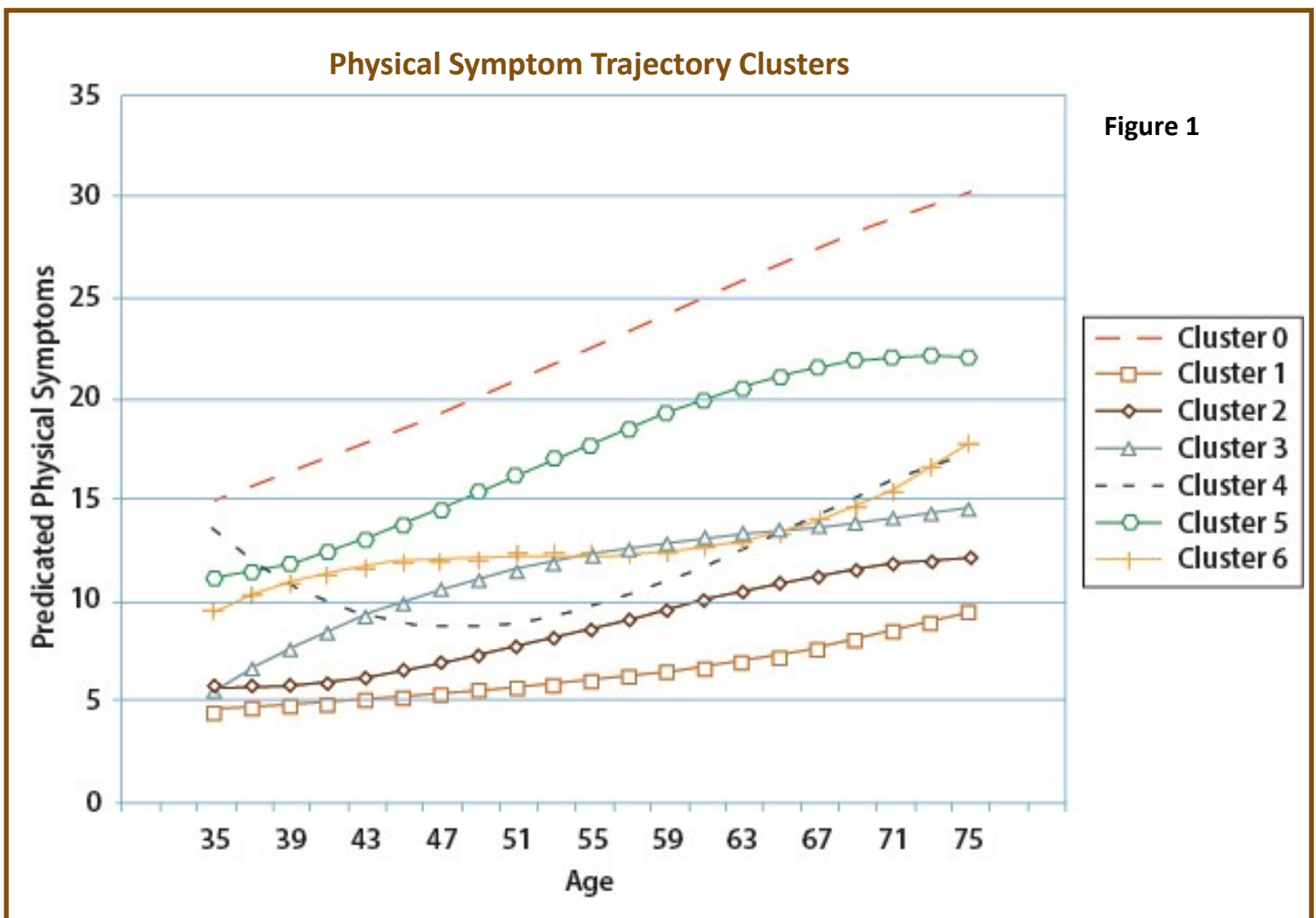


Figure 1: Study participants were grouped (or “clustered”) based on their health trajectory. This figure shows the mean physical symptom trajectories of the seven clusters. The general tendency was for physical symptoms to increase with age; however, there were marked differences among clusters in both the average level (number of symptoms) and in the shape of the trajectories, most of which were nonlinear.

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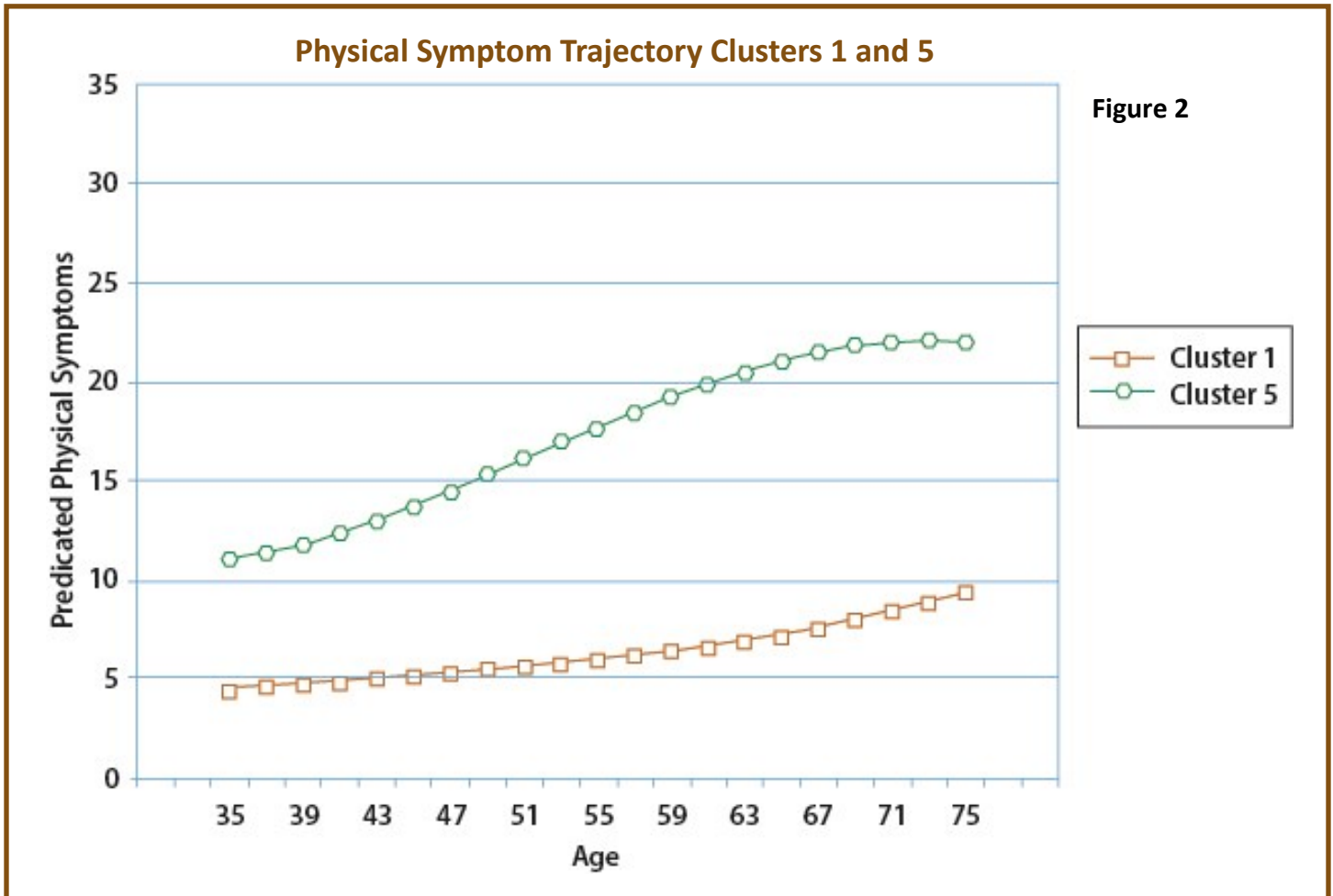


Figure 2: Lifestyle factors varied among the clusters, illustrating the role they play in health trajectories. This figure highlights two clusters from the original published chart:

Cluster 1: lowest average BMI*, fewer smokers (27%), higher education (62% had at least some college)

Cluster 5: highest average BMI*, more smokers (46%), less education (50% had at least some college)

*BMI: Body Mass Index; lifestyle factors were measured at study entry.

Key Points / Relevancy to UWEX:

Direct education: The work you are doing with older populations, including programming around exercise and nutrition, is really, really important! Helping constituents understand that changes are normal and not necessarily bad, and that variation is to be expected, can help them put aging into perspective. Knowing the importance of lifestyle factors may also motivate them to continue to exercise, eat right, and stay away from tobacco.

Community partners: This information highlights the importance of public infrastructure to support public health as communities age. The huge variation also means we can't pigeon-hole older adults.

"Aging on your own terms": Since changes in health are to be expected, but variability is huge, this phrase may be particularly relevant. It's not so much about "healthy" aging or even "optimal" or "successful" aging (which might disenfranchise older adults with disabilities or health problems), but rather a person-centered approach that helps older adults meet their own goals.