MANHATTAN, Kan. – At a glance, it may look a bit silly watching students in a classroom stuffing cotton balls in their ears or noses, taping popsicle sticks to their fingers and taping popcorn kernels to their feet.

Maybe even more so when the students are young or middle-aged adults.

But Kansas State University aging specialist Erin Martinez explains the activity is for a greater purpose. The students – some as young as kindergarten age, others professionals in the health industry – are learning valuable lessons related to sensory decline in older people.

“Often times,” Martinez said, “we think of aches and pains and chronic disease and other physical declines that older adults may face. They don’t all face those, but what's interesting is that we also have sensory declines that are often overlooked.”

Martinez said it is typical for a person’s sense of hearing, taste, smell, sight and touch to gradually decline as they age.

“The decline may not be severe enough that you notice it, but they are declining,” she said. “It’s like a tire on a car; as you go and go and go, eventually it starts to wear down.”

Martinez helps to lead a program titled, Gray for a Day, offered through local extension offices in Kansas. She said the program aims to simulate the challenges faced by older adults in daily routines, simple tasks (such as opening a door) and leisure and social activities due to sensory declines.

So, indeed, class participants may use cotton balls to block hearing or smell. Or popsicle sticks attached to fingers simulate the stiffness associated with arthritis. Rubber gloves reduce a person’s sense of touch. Popcorn kernels taped to feet simulate the pain of diabetic neuropathy. And a strip of plastic wrap covering the eyes simulates the effects of macular degeneration or cataracts.
Martinez said many older adults may also experience a decline in their sense of taste – particularly salty or sweet items. To compensate, those adults may add more salt or sugar to foods, which heightens other health risks, such as hypertension or diabetes.

“We want folks to understand what it could be like to experience sensory decline, and perhaps also help them understand how they might prevent it from happening for themselves,” Martinez said.

She adds: “The intent of the program is to educate people who are working with older adults, such as (family) caregivers and those in health professions, but also younger people. We see so much ageism among all populations, but we especially want to prevent that within our younger generations.”

As a result, extension agents often present classes in K-12 schools, as well as to Kansas 4-Hers. Martinez said many K-State family and consumer science extension agents offer classes in their communities.

More information on Gray for a Day is available online at www.aging.k-state.edu/programs/grayforaday/grayforaday.html, or from local extension offices in Kansas.

-30-

FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story

K-State Research and Extension statewide offices, https://www.ksre.k-state.edu/about/statewide-locations.html

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