

UConn Pepper Center Scholar Announcement

The overarching goal of the Older Americans Independence Center funded by the National Institute on Aging at NIH and the UConn Pepper Center (P30 AG067988) is to increase scientific knowledge leading to better strategies for maintaining or restoring independence in older persons. Our Research Education Component (REC) seeks to train the next generation of leaders in aging research by supporting Pepper Scholars through a multilevel training program including career development activities, education and training opportunities, and support for pilot research.

Following a highly competitive and rigorous selection process, the UConn Pepper Center is proud to announce the selection of four faculty as the second class of UConn Pepper Scholars.

Iman M. Al-Naggar, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor, UConn Center on Aging, Department of Cell Biology and Department of Surgery/Urology (School of Medicine). Dr. Al-Naggar's project, *Mito-LUTS: A Pilot Study of the Effect of MitoQ on Lower Urinary Tract Symptoms (LUTS) in Older Women with Metabolic Syndrome* will determine whether MitoQ (an antioxidant formulation designed to target mitochondria) can alleviate LUTS in older women suffering from metabolic syndrome, and whether this occurs by targeting biological pathways common to aging and metabolic syndrome.

Jacob Earp, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor, Department of Kinesiology (College of Agriculture, Health and Natural Resources). Dr. Earp's project, *Muscle Quality in Older Adults through the lens of Precision Gerontology and Geroscience* will identify the anatomical and physiological factors that drive muscle quality deterioration in older adults. More specifically, he wishes to evaluate the role of five distinct modifiable factors in muscle quality with aging including: 1) increased muscle adiposity, 2) reduced muscle fascicle length and angle, 3) muscle stiffening, 4) oxidative impairment, and 5) neurological impairment.

Cutter Lindbergh, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor, Department of Psychiatry (School of Medicine). Dr. Lindbergh's project *Computerized Cognitive Remediation of Post-COVID Neurocognitive Dysfunction in Older Adults* will Determine whether "NeuroFlex"—a neuroplasticity-based computerized cognitive remediation (CCR) intervention designed to improve executive functioning—holds potential to enhance function and independence in older adults with Post-COVID Neurocognitive Dysfunction (PCND).

Benjamin T. Ristau, M.D., M.H.A. is an Assistant Professor of Surgery, Division of Urology (School of Medicine). Dr. Ristau's project, *Matching Treatment Intensity with Frailty and Biologic Aging in Older Adults with Bladder Cancer* will: 1) determine the feasibility of completing pre- and post-operative clinical frailty assessments; 2) obtain pilot data evaluating the ability of these assessments to predict functional outcomes following radical cystectomy; and 3) explore the ability of a blood-based frailty biomarker panel and inflammatory signatures in selected tissues obtained at time of cystectomy to provide added value in predicting outcomes following surgery.

Congratulations to Drs. Al-Naggar, Ristau, Earp and Lindbergh!

We are grateful to the **17** expert reviewers from across UConn for their hard work and diligence, and we look forward to being able to announce future Pepper Scholar and Pilot Study Competitions in the coming years. We also wish to acknowledge Kathy Cameron, BSPHarm, MPH, a proud UConn alumna (Pharmacy; 1987) whose generosity and lifelong commitment to improving the lives of older adults has enabled the funding of one of these four positions. For more REC Scholar information please visit the UConn Pepper Center Website: [Research and Education Component \(REC\) | Pepper Center \(uconn.edu\)](#).