

## How to Stay Physically Active

**R**egular exercise is essential to maintaining a healthy lifestyle and is recommended for everyone, including older adults with a disability. It is never too late to start exercising.

Older adults often ask about the risks and benefits of exercise. Some questions commonly asked about exercise are:

- Will exercise make my symptoms (like fatigue, pain and weakness) worse?
- What types of exercise are safe for me?

Despite these concerns, current research shows:

- Exercise is a great way to improve health, physical functioning and overall well-being for older adults with a disability.
- Exercise can be done safely and, generally, does not make symptoms worse.

### How can exercise benefit you?

Exercise has many benefits for older adults with a disability, including:

- Increased strength and mobility
- Improved balance to help prevent falls
- Increased independence (improved ability to take care of daily activities)
- Decreased fatigue
- Improved mood (less depression and/or anxiety)
- Improved cardiovascular function (lower

blood pressure and cholesterol)

- Improved social interactions/self-esteem
- Improved bowel and bladder functioning
- Increased clarity of thinking
- Improved sleep
- Prevent weight gain

You may not see or feel immediate benefits but it is important to keep exercising.

Benefits such as increasing physical strength or decreasing fatigue may take many months.

If you are new to exercise or have not exercised regularly in a long time, you may experience body aches or fatigue. Generally, these symptoms get better as you become more accustomed to exercise and get in better physical shape.

### Setting exercise goals

Older adults with disabilities have a wide range of physical abilities, so it is important to consult your health care provider to find the best exercise program for you. For example, if you use a wheelchair your health care provider can recommend physical activities that you can safely do in your wheelchair.

- Talk with your health care provider before starting an exercise program to get advice on how to start.
- Keep your health care provider informed about your exercise progress she/he can guide you towards your goals.

# Promoting Healthy Aging for Everyone

- Talk with a physical therapist to identify specific exercises to help you achieve your fitness goals safely.
- Keep track of your progress.
  - ◆ Start with realistic exercise goals. Write down what exercises you want to do, when, where and for how long.
  - ◆ Keep track of your exercise progress to help you set new goals. Some people find that tracking progress helps them stay motivated.
  - ◆ If you do not meet your exercise goals, don't get discouraged. Any exercise is better than no exercise.
  - ◆ Write down your barriers to exercise and bring notes to your health care provider to brainstorm ways to overcome them.

## Keeping up with exercise

Staying motivated to keep up with an exercise program is difficult for many people. Try different approaches to see what helps you keep up with exercise.

- When and how you exercise can help keep you on-track. Ask yourself:
  - ◆ Are you more likely to exercise in the morning, afternoon or night?
  - ◆ Does exercising with a friend give you encouragement to exercise?
  - ◆ Does joining an exercise class help keep you motivated to stick with it?
- Keep a positive attitude. Focus on the physical activities that you CAN DO and not those that you can't.
- Find physical activities you enjoy and schedule those activities often.
- It does not matter whether you are "exercising" in a gym or through walking or pushing your wheelchair outside. It all

counts.

- Find the exercise environment that feels comfortable for you. For example, you may prefer to do water aerobics in a class for women over 50 or adaptive yoga, instead of going to a gym that's open to all ages.
- If you also want more social activities, look for exercise activities that provide opportunities for social interactions such as a walking club or group based exercise class for people over 65.
- Make exercise a habit. Make some form of physical activity part of your daily routine, like taking a walk after lunch.
- Avoid sitting in front of the TV or computer for extended periods. Take a 5-minute stretch or activity break at least once per hour.
- Think of easy ways to include more activity into your daily routine. For example, you may take the stairs instead of the elevator or propel yourself faster in your wheelchair to increase your heart rate.

## About exercise

Your exercise program should include stretching, aerobic exercise, and strength-training.

**Stretching** – Improving flexibility in your muscles is important for maintaining your ability to perform everyday activities and prevent injuries.

- Stretch for at least 10 minutes per day.
- Stretch only after you have done a 5-10 minute warm-up to prevent injuries caused by stretching cold muscles. You can also stretch after your workout.
- Stretch slowly, holding each stretch for 30-60 seconds. Be sure to stretch all the major muscle groups in your body.
- Yoga and tai chi include a variety of

stretching exercises.

**Aerobic activity** (also called endurance or cardio activity) is any activity that causes your heart rate to increase for an extended period of time. Some popular types of aerobic activity for older adults are walking, swimming, water aerobics, and dancing. You can also use stationary equipment for some of these activities such as a stationary bike or treadmill.

- Experts recommend a goal of at least 150 minutes total of moderate-intensity aerobic per week.
- If you are just getting started, increase your aerobic activity slowly. Start with a shorter time period and work up to 150 minute total over many weeks or as you feel ready.
- If time is limited, you can use several 10 minute periods of physical activity in a day.
- You know you are doing moderate-intensity aerobic exercise when you can talk but not sing. You will be breathing more heavily than usual, and you'll be sweating. But, you'll feel like you can keep going for a while.
- Another way to tell when you're doing moderate-intensity aerobic exercise is by checking your pulse and calculating your heart rate. For more information on how to take your pulse and calculate your heart rate, go to CDC Target Heart Rate.

**Strength training** (also called resistance training) is any kind of activity that causes your muscles to work against an applied force or weight. This helps maintain and improve the strength of your muscles. You can do strength training exercises with weights (such as small hand weights, wrist cuff weights, or even a soup can) or you can use elastic resistance bands.

- Do strength training exercises at least

twice a week.

- Do a variety of strength training exercises so you target all your major muscle groups (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, and arms).
- Do core strength exercises to strengthen the muscles in your stomach, back and around your pelvis. Pilates and yoga include many core strength exercises.

## Preventing problems

- Start slowly by not pushing yourself to do too much at once, especially if you have been inactive for a long time.
- Keep hydrated. Water is the best hydration – drink more water before, during, and after you exercise.
- Make sure you stay cool. This can mean exercising in front of a fan, in a cool room, or after the peak heat of the day.
- Take time to recuperate after you exercise. You may need to rest and replenish your body with protein and water.
- Be aware of your surroundings when you exercise (such as uneven sidewalks) to avoid injuries and falls.
- Pay attention to your level of fatigue since falls are more common when your body is tired.
- Where appropriate footwear.

## Where can you exercise?

The most common exercise is walking or wheeling. Walking is free and can be done alone, with someone else, or your dog. Go slowly and take rests as needed.

Community centers, YMCAs, and private fitness facilities offer a variety of exercise classes, aerobic and strength training equipment, and activities such as swimming, water aerobics and wheelchair basketball.

For those who prefer to exercise in their homes, equipment is available, ranging from simple exercise bands, exercise balls, and free weights to more complicated (and expensive) equipment such as wheelchair rollers and electrical stimulation cycles.

Exercise videos for people with disabilities are available as DVDs and online. Public TV stations also offer fitness programs such as Sit and Be Fit. Some medical plans offer coverage for access to gym facilities or group based exercise programs for people over 65 such as Silver Sneakers.

### Resources and references

National Center on Physical Activity and Disability - <http://www.ncpad.org/>

Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans - <http://www.health.gov/PAGuidelines/>

Healthfinder.gov, Get Active - <http://healthfinder.gov/prevention/ViewTopic.aspx?topicId=22>

American College of Sports Medicine - <http://acsm.org/>

Exercise and Physical Activity for Older Adults, Position Stand

**Authorship:** How to Stay Physically Active was developed by Samantha Artherholt, PhD, and published by the University of Washington Aging RRTC. Content is based on research evidence and/or professional consensus.

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