

Increasing Physical Activity for Adults with a Disability

The health benefits of regular physical activity participation (including both aerobic and muscle strengthening) are well known and encouraged for everyone across the lifespan.

The Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans provide detailed prescriptions for children and adolescents, adults, and older adults. Additional physical activity guidance for adults with disabilities are also included and highlight the health benefits for this underserved population. Despite these guidelines availability, health disparities among adults with disabilities continue to increase.

The purpose of this ACSM brochure is to highlight meaningful health facts and activity barriers facing adults with disabilities. Several strategies and ideas to overcome these barriers are recommended.

What Do We Know About Adults with Disabilities and Their Physical Activity Participation?

- One in five adults or over 53 million people in the United States have a disability
- 34% of adults with disabilities report 14 or more physically unhealthy days in the past 30 days compared to only 5% for adults without disabilities
- Obesity rates for adults with disabilities are 58% higher than for adults without disabilities
- 38% of adults with disabilities report participating in sufficient aerobic physical activity compared to 54% of adults without disabilities
- Only 14% of adults with disabilities meet both aerobic and muscle strengthening guidelines for good health compared to 23% of adults without disabilities

Along with the alarming statistics above, adults with disabilities find themselves more susceptible to poor health due to a rise in secondary conditions that are not a direct result of the primary conditions. These secondary conditions arise from barriers that influence adults with disabilities' daily interaction with the environment (including others with/without disabilities). Barriers are defined as obstacles individuals face when participating in physical activity.



Barriers to Physical Activity Participation Among Adults with Disabilities Include:

- Economic Issues
- Professional Knowledge, Training, and Education
- Perceptions and Attitudes of Adults without Disabilities, including Professionals
- Non-Inclusive Policies and Procedures at the Facility and Community Level
- Availability of Resources

Disability is not a health condition itself, but often viewed as limitations in the context of the community and society in which the person lives. However, there are opportunities to improve physical activity participation among adults with physical disabilities. These efforts will require multiple stakeholders to help make local environments more inclusive for everyone.

Given the complexities inherent with individuals with disabilities' engagement with others and their community, an interactional perspective is an effective approach for overcoming typical barriers, thereby increasing physical activity opportunities for individuals with disabilities living in our communities. This perspective allows for engagement at the individual level, social and professional level and community level. The included suggestions that follow highlight the role of multiple stakeholders needed to ensure increased physical activity for individuals with disabilities.

Individual with Disabilities

- To overcome policy barriers, determine the inclusiveness of physical activity programming of interest (i.e. utilize the Accessibility Instruments Measuring Fitness and Recreation Environments Manual [AIMFREE] to determine how accessible fitness and swimming facilities are to your ability level) <http://www.nchpad.org/426/2254/AIMFREE~Manuals>.
- To overcome training and education barriers, seek out professionals with experience providing physical activity programming for individuals with disabilities (e.g. Professionals should have experience with Adapted Physical Activity, Disability Sports, be a Certified Inclusive Fitness Trainer [CIFT – <http://certification.acsm.org/acsm-inclusive-fitness-trainer>], or be a Certified Therapeutic Recreational Specialist [CTRS]) – <http://nctrc.org/>.
- To overcome resource barriers, connect with a disability support group network (consider local hospital or community, state, and/or networks established on social media).

Family and Allied Health Professionals

- To overcome attitudinal barriers, family members of adults with disabilities should be supportive of efforts to improve their loved one's health. Consider inclusive physical activities that can be done together and/or in small groups (e.g. tandem cycling, canoeing, attending a fitness class).
- To overcome economic barriers, Allied Health Professionals should be aware of their program offerings and be willing to accommodate based on individual ability levels and equipment accessibility (i.e. utilize the AIMFREE to determine how accessible your fitness and swimming facilities are for individuals with disabilities or incorporate the “universal design” concept that increases the usability of your facility for the broader population).

- To overcome resource barriers, family members should be prepared to advocate on behalf of their loved ones for greater access to available physical activity programming in their local communities. Allied Health Professionals should be aware of the needs of the greater community and plan physical activity programs that are inclusive from the outset.

Community Involvement

- To overcome policy barriers, local communities should ensure that public parks, public recreation access, and businesses that provide physical activity opportunities are abiding by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA – <https://www.ada.gov/>), an important piece of civil rights legislation prohibiting discrimination against, or segregation of, people with disabilities in all activities, programs, or services—including fitness and recreational related.
- To overcome economic barriers, physical activity businesses should recognize adults with disabilities as untapped clientele deserving of considerable marketing efforts. Given that adults with disabilities typically don't engage in these opportunities alone, additional family members would also be consumers of these services.
- To overcome resource barriers, local communities and physical activity businesses need to ensure marketing efforts reflect a larger representation of the population they serve. These marketing efforts should include print media, commercial media, and social media to increase its reach to individuals with disabilities.

This brochure was created and updated by Marquell Johnson, Ph.D., CSCS and is a product of ACSM's Consumer Information Committee.

Staying Active Pays Off!

Those who are physically active tend to live longer, healthier lives. Research shows that moderate physical activity—such as 30 minutes a day of brisk walking—significantly contributes to a longer life. Even a person with health risk factors like high blood pressure, depression, diabetes or a smoking habit can gain real benefits from incorporating regular physical activity into their daily life.

As many dieters have found, exercise can also help you achieve weight loss goals. What's more, regular exercise can help lower blood pressure, control blood sugar, improve cholesterol levels and build stronger, denser bones. Exercise helps improve your mental well-being too.

A Complete Physical Activity Program

Regular physical activity provides many health benefits. While it's not required, working with an exercise professional can help you reach your fitness goals, tailor exercises to your abilities and most importantly, minimize your risk of injury. You should expect the exercise professional to ask you to fill out an exercise pre-participation health screening. This form will ask if you exercise regularly and if you have any health concerns that should prompt you to see your healthcare provider before getting started. The following precautions will help you safely participate in exercise programs:

If you DO NOT exercise regularly:

[If you have not been diagnosed by a doctor with, AND do not have signs or symptoms of cardiovascular, metabolic or kidney disease](#), THEN you can start right away with light to moderate intensity exercise. You can gradually build up to vigorous exercise if you stay free of any symptoms of health problems.

If you have ever been diagnosed by a doctor, with OR have signs/symptoms of cardiovascular, metabolic or kidney disease, THEN it is recommended to seek medical clearance before beginning an exercise program. Once you get medical clearance, you should start with light to moderate intensity. You can gradually build up to vigorous exercise if you stay free of any symptoms of health problems.

If you DO exercise regularly:

If you have not been diagnosed with, AND do not have signs or symptoms of cardiovascular, metabolic, or kidney disease, you can continue with moderate exercise or gradually build to vigorous exercise intensity.

If you have been diagnosed with cardiovascular, metabolic, or kidney disease AND do not have any sign/symptoms of health problems, then you can continue exercising at a moderate intensity. If you received medical clearance within the last 12 months AND your symptoms have not changed, then can continue with moderate exercise or gradually build to vigorous exercise intensity.

If at any time you develop a sign or symptom of cardiovascular, metabolic or kidney disease, discontinue exercise and seek a doctor's clearance right away. Then, after getting medical clearance, you may continue your moderate intensity exercise program and gradually progress your effort.

Getting Started with an Exercise Program

A well-rounded exercise program includes aerobic, strength training exercises, but not necessarily in the same session. This blend helps maintain or improve overall health and function. So, it is important to choose exercises you enjoy and can fit into your schedule.

Not all exercise programs are suitable for everyone. Activities should be carried out at an effort level that is comfortable for you. You should stop participation in any exercise activity that causes pain. In such event, you should consult with your health care professional immediately.

ACSM recommends you accumulate at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity (working hard enough to break a sweat, but still able to carry on a conversation) most days per week, or 20 minutes of more vigorous activity three days per week. Combinations of moderate- and vigorous-intensity activity can be performed to meet this recommendation.

Examples of typical aerobic exercises are: walking, running, stair climbing, cycling, rowing, cross country skiing and swimming. Examples of common strength training exercises are: weight machines, free weights and resistance bands. Flexibility exercises can include: stretches of muscles around different joints and yoga.

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