

## Help sheet 16:

### Incidental and leisure activity

Incidental activities include those where physical activity is undertaken as part of routine activities, for example, gardening, doing the housework, shopping and dressing. Many other leisure activities also have a physical activity component, for example, bocce, lawn bowls and dancing. Most of these activities can be modified for participation by frailer people (often in consultation with a health professional).

Many of these forms of activity have potential to achieve positive health outcomes, but have not been investigated in the research literature. Programs need not be confined or limited to those where there is current evidence of health benefits, but should use this evidence as a basis for facilitating a broad involvement by people in a wide range of activities.

Benefits can be seen from doing a little bit and regularly for impaired older people. Schnelle and colleagues (1995) investigated the effectiveness of encouraging mobility impaired older people in residential care to stand, walk and transfer a little more than usual each time the person went to the toilet. A maximum of 20 minutes of extra activity was undertaken per day. They found the person's walking and standing endurance improved over an eight-week period.

#### Advantages

One benefit of performing incidental activity is that it involves activities the person is familiar with, so is less daunting than starting a new physical activity program. Also, incidental activity generally has a purpose rather than doing physical activity for physical activity's sake. While some people may not be interested in formal activities, they would not consider personal care and domestic tasks as a form of exercise.

#### Disadvantages

One of the disadvantages of incidental activity is that there is usually no supervision of the person. Therefore, if safety is a concern it is important to involve a health professional or GP.

**'I try to walk to do a lap of the clothes line to the back door three times each day. It makes me feel better to get outside and have some fresh air. If I feel tired I have a rest...next week I am going to try to do four laps.'**

### Helping older people obtain the benefits of physical activity through incidental activity

- Encourage older people to perform the physical activities they are able to do, such as some household activities and gardening.
- Encourage people to participate in a variety of leisure activities they find interesting, for example, gardening, lawn bowls, tai chi, dancing.
- Ensure the safety of any activity for the older person (see Help sheets 13 and 14 in this Resource Kit). If safety is a concern, consider referring the person to a health professional for further assessment.

- If safe, encourage the person to slowly build up their usual activities or the activities they enjoy.
- If assisting a more frail person with incidental activity (for example, showering, dressing), encourage them to do as much of the activity themselves as they can safely do.
- Routinely talk to people about the benefits of incorporating physical activity into their lives.
- If a person is having difficulty performing an activity they were previously able to perform or is interested in performing an activity they have not done for a while (for example, gardening), consider referring them to a health professional. A physiotherapist or occupational therapist may be able to assist the person to perform the activity through the use of aids, modification or exercise.

### Reference

Schnelle J, Macrae, P et al. (1995) Functional incidental training, mobility performance, and incontinence care with nursing home residents. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* 43: 1356–62.