

Help sheet 13:

Determining optimum levels of physical activity

Optimum levels of physical activity will vary from person to person. If working towards increasing physical activity to improve health outcomes, it is recommended to start at a level that is comfortable and to gradually build on this. Excessive increases in the amount of physical activity being performed relative to what the older person is used to can cause a range of health problems, such as chest pain. If these occur, the activity should be stopped and a medical referral made.

As a general rule, the level of physical activity can be graduated in one of three ways:

- by gradually increasing the time performing an activity
- by gradually increasing the frequency of performing an activity
- by gradually increasing the intensity of the performed activity (for example, increasing the weight increments in strength training).

It is important to note the broad nature of physical activity. It is not only formal activities such as walking, exercise classes and dance groups, but includes anything that involves movement. Tasks such as showering, shopping and housework are also forms of physical activity.

Other considerations for optimal performance of physical activity

- Ensure that the older person is doing the correct physical activity by having the correct exercises prescribed by a health professional (refer to Help sheet 14 in this Resource Kit for further information).
- Avoid doing physical activity during the hottest parts of the day on warm or humid days.
- If doing physical activity at an optimal moderate pace, the older person should be able to carry on a conversation while exercising. Moderate intensity activity involves effort and causes a slight, but noticeable, increase in breathing and heart rate.
- Ensure the person avoids exercise immediately after meals.
- Ensure the person avoids undertaking physical activity above their day to day activities if they have a fever or a bad cold.
- Have plenty of fluids available before, during or after physical activity to prevent dehydration. Refer to Help sheets 3.3, 4.7, 4.8, 4.10 and 5.4 (Nutrition resource manual). Guidelines on fluid needs are given in Help sheet 5.4 (Nutrition resource manual).
- If the person appears unsteady or at risk of falls while performing their physical activities, consult a physiotherapist or occupational therapist.
- Ensure the person uses their walking aids appropriately while performing physical activity. If certain aids are not required (such as footplates of a wheelchair) the aids should be stored safely out of the way.
- No pain, no gain is not true. If the person is experiencing pain during their activity they should stop and consult with their general practitioner (GP) or other health professional.

- Although rare, when individuals perform physical activity tailored to suit their abilities and health status, injuries, accidents and cardiovascular events can occur. It is therefore essential that precautions are taken and if you are unsure about an older person's ability to perform a certain type of physical activity, obtain advice from somebody with the appropriate training (such as their GP, a physiotherapist, occupational therapist or exercise physiologist).
- Ensure you are aware of your organisation's emergency procedures whether you are seeing an older person at their home or at your facility.

Warning signs of over exertion during physical activity

- Unable to talk during activity
- Facial expressions and body language
- Rapid breathing
- Chest pain
- Pain
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Loss of coordination
- Flushed or pale skin.

Cues, such as stiffness the following day, are also an indication that the person has over exerted themselves. It could also reflect a lack of warm up and cool down exercises.

For people with Diabetes Mellitus who are taking tablets or insulin to treat their condition

People with diabetes who are taking tablets or insulin for their condition have an increased risk of a hypoglycaemic reaction ('hypo') if undertaking unplanned or more than their usual amount of exercise. To ensure that the risk is minimised, obtain the latest information on preventing and managing hypoglycaemic reactions. The following steps will assist in this.

- Ask your local diabetes educator or dietitian for information and/or training on how to prevent people from experiencing 'hypos' and how to recognise and treat a 'hypo' if it occurs.
- Ask the person with diabetes mellitus what education they have had on what to do in the event of a hypoglycaemic reaction or 'hypo'.
- Ask the person if they are aware of the types of symptoms they may have as warning signs.
- Access further important information from the following organisations:

International Diabetes Institute: www.diabetes.com.au or 03 9258 5050

Diabetes Australia: www.diabetesaustralia.com.au or 1300 136 588

If you require further advice, refer to Help sheet 14 in this Resource Kit, 'Accessing health professionals' to address physical activity needs for details on physiotherapy, occupational therapy and dietetic/nutrition organisations.