

Help sheet 12:

Screening and assessing an individual's physical activity needs

Assessing and making recommendations regarding physical activity takes experience and knowledge. Therefore, if you do not have the training in this area, simply picking up on when an older person may benefit from improving their levels of physical activity and referring on to an appropriately qualified person is a very valuable first step. This referral may be to another member of your team, for example, a Home and Community Care assessor with relevant qualifications and experience or a health professional, such as, an allied health worker at a community health centre.

Screening tools

The Service Coordination Tool Templates include questions that can assist primary health and community service practitioners to identify an individual's physical activity status. These tools include the Health Behaviours Profile, Health Conditions Profile and the Functional Screen. These tools include:

- questions relating to a person's activities of daily living (Functional Screen)
- questions relating to physical activity, physical fitness and nutritional risk (Health Behaviours Profile) and
- questions relating to falls risk (Health conditions Profile).

Triggers for screening and assessment

It is very important to note that some problems that may indicate insufficient physical activity in an older person may be due to medical problems, for example, increased shortness of breath can result from heart and lung problems as well as a lack of physical activity. It is very important to seek a health professional's advice when an older person experiences problems, such as:

- difficulty with usual activities such as shopping, housework, walking in the neighbourhood, showering or dressing independently, getting out of chairs
- being unable to perform activities the older person was previously able to manage (other than for reasons of ill health)
- falls or near falls
- the older person reports feeling unsteady on their feet or is expressing a fear of doing their usual activities due to falling
- the older person appears unsteady on their feet or walks around the house holding onto the furniture
- the older person has started to use a gait aid (a stick or frame) not prescribed by a physiotherapist
- the older person is becoming more tired or short of breath performing their usual activities.

An older person demonstrating or reporting any of these problems, or your observation of these problems, indicates a need to discuss with the person their physical activity levels and possible reasons for any decline in their physical activity.

Some older people, despite their lack of physical activity, may not experience the range of functional limitations mentioned above. However, by being inactive they are missing out on the preventive benefits of physical activity.

Screening and assessing for physical activity status

When screening and assessing an older person's physical activity, some of the things you will want to know are:

- What is the person's current level or form of physical activity (consider formal physical activity, walking and incidental activity)?
- What medical conditions or disabilities does the person have? Do these problems affect the person's ability to perform physical activity?
- Given the person's age and medical conditions, are they sufficiently physically active?
- Is the person as active as they would like to be?
- Do you feel they could be more physically active? What are the barriers to increasing their physical activity?

It is also very important to consider the older person's nutrition:

- Does the person have a higher level of nutritional risk? Refer to sections 2.1–2.8 (Nutrition resource manual) for nutrition risk assessment tool and Help sheets in Sections 3 and 4 (Nutrition resource manual) for assistance in management of this risk.
- Is the person's nutritional status adequate for increasing their physical activity? Refer to Help sheets 3.1–3.3 (Nutrition resource manual).
- Is the person at risk of dehydration? Are they able to take sufficient drinks to sustain fluid needs during activity? Assess risks by referring 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 sheets 5.4 (Nutrition resource manual).

Where the older person has significant, ongoing nutritional risk or problems in maintaining nutritional status, referral to a community-based or home care dietitian is recommended. Refer to Help sheet 6.1 (Nutrition resource manual).

Choosing ways to improve an individual's physical activity level

Different people have different needs in relation to physical activity and there are many factors to consider when suggesting changes to somebody's physical activity level. The *Decision making tree for improving older persons' physical activity levels* provides steps you can follow in identifying ways older people may increase their physical activity levels. It is essential to build on the person's interests, motivators and barriers when considering a change to their physical activity levels (see Help sheets 10 and 11 in this Resource Kit) and to build up any changes slowly.

Decision making tree for improving older persons' physical activity levels

