

Help sheet 18:

Setting up a physical activity program for a group

If you are considering setting up a physical activity program for older people, there are many issues to consider. A resource titled *Older, smarter, fitter: A guide for providers of sport and physical activity programs for older Australians* (Australian Sports Commission and Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2001) is a valuable guide for anyone undertaking such a program. It includes a range of resources, contacts and program examples in Australia. It is available through the website:

<http://www.dva.gov.au/media/publicat/2002/oldersmarter/>

This help sheet targets the needs of frailer older people already involved in a group, such as a Planned Activity Group, and should be read in conjunction with *Older, smarter, fitter: A guide for providers of sport and physical activity programs for older Australians*.

Getting started

Setting up a physical activity program for older people requires considerable planning. It may take months from the initial planning session to the first session of activity. Additionally, once the program is up and running it is important to continue ongoing monitoring of its success (for example, through satisfaction surveys, ongoing discussions).

If you are considering starting a physical activity program for a pre-existing group, it is important to target the program to the group's interests and motivations and encourage your group members to be involved in the planning. Potential discussion topics with the group could include:

- the benefits of physical activity
- current levels of physical activity and the reasons they are not physically active (if they are not)
- different types of physical activity that could be undertaken
- potential activities they may be interested in.

Options for groups of frail older people

Potential options for the style of physical activity that could be undertaken may be:

- structured physical activity programs (as described in Help sheet 15 in this Resource Kit), including strengthening, balance, endurance activities or a combination of all of these
- walking programs (less suitable for frail older people if supervision is limited)
- tai chi
- general leisure options, such as bowls, bocce, dancing, gardening group or organised tours with a walking component.

Things to consider

When planning an activity program for a group, you need to consider:

- most activities can be altered to suit more or less frail older people
- cultural/gender/age appropriate activities
- activities people may not have tried before and which they are keen to do
- activities that can be done outdoors, such as tai chi or a walk in the park
- options regarding health promotion education rather than a physical activity, for example, a guest speaker, information brochures and posters on nutrition and physical activity
- running joint nutrition and physical activity themes (refer to Help sheet 7 in this Resource Kit, 'Nutrition related activities in group settings')
- involving other organisations, such as libraries, gyms, schools
- involving physically active older people as role models to inspire others
- setting up a physical activity sub-committee from your group participants so physical activity stays on people's minds
- including behavioural strategies such as goal setting, self-monitoring, feedback, ongoing support, recognition of potential relapse and offering strategies to prevent relapse and assist with ongoing participation (King, 2001)
- for classes targeting women, including a social component can increase participation (King, 2001).

Further considerations for getting started are included in *Older, smarter, fitter: A guide for providers of sport and physical activity programs for older Australians*.

Safety issues

Preparation is paramount when considering safety for a group exercise program. Some considerations before beginning a program are:

- ensure the program is led by an appropriately qualified instructor (see below) who is aware of the special needs of older people
- ensure the leader, participants and venue are covered by insurance
- run the program in an appropriate safe environment with safe equipment
- ensure emergency procedures are in place and the staff are well trained
- ensure those who need it have a medical review prior to participation (see Help sheets 12 and 14 in this Resource Kit)
- ensure participants take adequate fluids during exercise and that additional fluids are taken in hot weather or in the case of increased sweating. 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 sheet 5.4 (Nutrition resource manual)
- ensure that there is not over-exposure to damaging UV light by following the guide given in Help sheets 4 and 17 in this Resource Kit
- ensure an appropriate warm up and warm down is performed, and the intensity of the exercise is targeted to the class
- ensure there is appropriate supervision and monitoring of participants for any activity performed

- adapt activities to enable older people of different abilities to participate (for example, sitting exercises for some, standing for others)
- advise participants not to exercise if they are unwell or very tired
- advise participants to stop if they experience chest pain, discomfort or pressure, dizziness or light-headedness, nausea, dehydration, sweating or hot flushes not explained by physical effort, irregular heartbeat or any unusual or worsening pain.

(Adapted from *Older, smarter, fitter: A guide for providers of sport and physical activity programs for older Australians*)

Training for exercise leaders

Leading a group-based exercise class for older people safely is no easy task and should not be undertaken lightly. It is vital that the person running the class has the appropriate training and qualifications. Training is available through a variety of programs in Victoria.

Kinect Australia (incorporating VICFIT in Victoria)

Kinect Australia is the first point of contact for somebody looking to run physical activity classes for older people. A Certificate 3 in Fitness is required to become a fitness instructor. The next level, Certificate 4 in Fitness fully qualifies you to lead physical activity classes for older people. The Kinect Australia website outlines the requirements to become a qualified fitness instructor and lists Registered Training Providers in metropolitan and regional areas offering Certificates 3 and 4 in Fitness.

See: <http://www.kinectaustralia.com.au/fitness/>

Click on the Resources hyperlink for list of Registered Training Providers.

Living longer living stronger™

This program is designed by the Council on the Ageing (COTA) Victoria and aims to increase the range and quality of strength training opportunities for older people. Living longer living stronger™ offers endorsement of facilities to run strength training programs for older people. The COTA website also provides information on Certificates 3 and 4 in Fitness.

For more information see: <http://www.cotavic.org.au>

NoFalls

NoFalls offers training for exercise group leaders to run its NoFalls exercise programs. The NoFalls exercise program is a 15-week group exercise program, which includes a combination of exercises with an emphasis on balance improvement. For more information see:

<http://www.general.monash.edu.au/muarc/nofalls/>

Arthritis Victoria

Arthritis Victoria runs training programs for people of differing levels of experience in running gentle exercise classes, strength training, Tai Chi for Arthritis and Warm Water Exercise. For more information see:

<http://www.arthritisvic.org.au>

References

King, AC (2001) 'Interventions to promote physical activity by older adults', *Journals of Gerontology Series A* 2001, Vol 56A (Special issue 11) 36–46.

Help sheet 19:

Physical activity for older people with medical conditions

People with chronic medical conditions have special needs in regard to physical activity. Such **people should consult with their general practitioner (GP) before they change their levels of physical activity**. This would ensure the type of activity chosen:

- **is safe**
- can be of the most benefit to the person.

After consulting with their GP, a physical activity program may have to be developed by a physiotherapist or the person may need to attend a special group tailored to people with their condition.

Falls

Falls are caused by a combination of many factors, including decreased balance and decreased strength. Performing appropriate physical activity can help to prevent falls.

Special physical activity programs are available for people who fall, such as the NoFalls Program and balance classes.

People with a problem with falls or near falls may need to be reviewed at a Falls and Mobility Clinic. These are special outpatient services in hospitals, which have a geriatrician, physiotherapist, occupational therapist and other health professionals assessing people and developing a treatment plan to reduce future risk of falls.

See falls prevention resources listed under Physical Activity Resources in Section 6 'Nutrition, Physical Activity and General Resources' in this Resource Kit. In the resource *Standing on your own two feet* (Australian Pensioners and Superannuants' Federation, 1999), older people talk about how to prevent falls. This resource is available in a range of languages other than English.

Arthritis

Arthritis affects a person's joints. There are two main types of arthritis: osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. The two conditions present differently and are managed quite differently. Physical activity can help people with arthritis by strengthening the muscles to protect joints, decreasing pain, and preventing joints from becoming stiff.

Activities such as walking, water exercise, strength training, tai chi and dancing are often appropriate for people with arthritis. However, there is evidence that vigorous and prolonged activity can aggravate arthritis. People with arthritis need to be careful performing physical activity when they have pain and should avoid exercise of very painful inflamed joints, unless it is under a GP's or physiotherapist's strict supervision.

Diet can assist in managing some types of arthritis, for example, weight control to reduce pressure on weight-bearing joints. Foods containing Omega-3 fats have some benefits through their anti-inflammatory effect in the body. Seek further advice from a dietitian.