

Help sheet 9:

Key messages and benefits of physical activity

The purpose of this help sheet is to outline the benefits of physical activity and how these benefits can be related to all older people.

Key messages

- Older people, both male and female, do benefit from regular physical activity.
- Physical activity need not be strenuous to achieve benefits. Older people can obtain significant health benefits with a moderate amount of physical activity, preferably daily.
- Frailty, disability, chronic illness or extreme age is not a contraindication to physical activity. In fact, the evidence shows there can be significant benefits for frailer older people and with the appropriate activity the risk of adverse events is very small.
- In addition to cardiorespiratory endurance (aerobic) activity, older people will benefit from activities that strengthen muscle and improve balance and flexibility. Improvement on any of these can reduce or prevent a number of problems often associated with increased age.
- Encouraging participation in personal and domestic activities of daily living (such as showering and housework) can improve independence for those experiencing difficulties in these areas.

Note: Cardiorespiratory endurance is the ability to perform sustained physical activity (for example, walking) without getting too puffed.

Facts

- The loss of strength and stamina attributed to ageing is in part caused by reduced physical activity. This is reversible with physical activity.
- Physical inactivity is the second greatest contributor (after smoking) to the burden of disease in Australia.
- Women are less likely to be sufficiently active than men. Levels of activity decrease with age for both men and women.
- Among people aged 65 years and older, walking and gardening are by far the most popular physical activities.

Benefits of physical activity

Different people can benefit from physical activity in different ways. Being physically active can be effective in reducing the risk of disease for a healthy older person as well as limiting the progression of a condition for a person who already has a disease. For example, one of the benefits of being physically active to a healthy older person is minimising the risk of diabetes. However, for somebody already with the disease, being physically active may improve the management and decrease the risk of associated health problems such as coronary artery disease, assist diabetes control and prevent functional decline as the person ages.

Some of the main benefits of physical activity are:

- Disease prevention
 - reduce the risk of falls and fracture
 - reduce the risk of developing coronary heart disease or stroke, high blood pressure, colon cancer and diabetes.
- Physical benefits
 - helps people with chronic, disabling conditions improve their stamina and muscle strength
 - improves balance
 - outdoor activity maintains normal Vitamin D levels vital for bone health and other important body functions (see Help sheet 5.6, Nutrition resource manual) and Help sheet 4 in this Resource Kit, 'Increasing variety at mealtimes')
 - helps maintain healthy muscles and joints
 - can help reduce blood pressure in some people with hypertension
 - can improve bowel motility and reduce problems of constipation
 - can improve some medical conditions, such as arthritis and diabetes
 - having adequate nutrition can help older people to be physically active, especially if they have health problems
 - can help reduce the need for some medications (for example, may improve sleep patterns).
- Functional benefits
 - increases independence in activities of daily living such as having the strength and balance to perform household tasks or the endurance to walk around the supermarket
 - improves physical functioning, including activities such as walking, climbing stairs
 - possibly improves cognitive function (for example, planning, memory).
- Psychological and social benefits
 - fosters improvements in mood, feelings of wellbeing and personal control
 - reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression
 - helps maintain social networks and gives a sense of involvement (if the physical activity is done in a group).

Note: Some of the benefits can be specific to a type of physical activity. For example, for an improvement in muscle strength the activity must include using muscles against resistance (for example, weights, moving body weight against gravity, moving a pot plant as part of gardening).

Mrs Smith cares for her husband who has a chronic illness. Mrs Smith's caring role takes up most of her time. She is beginning to feel stressed and physically exhausted. She discussed this with her husband's physiotherapist who informed her of various exercise programs at her local community health centre. Mrs Smith made enquiries about the programs offered and now attends tai chi classes while her husband has in-home respite. She then practises tai chi at home to help with relaxation. Mrs Smith has reported improved physical health as well as improved physical functioning which assists with her caring role. Another major benefit that Mrs Smith reports is the social aspect associated with attending the group. Mrs Smith enjoys the opportunity to have a cuppa and a chat with the other exercise group participants.

People who are physically active report having more energy.

References

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- Morris, ME & Schoo, AM (2004) *Optimizing exercise and physical activity in older people*. Oxford: Elsevier Science Limited.