

Help sheet 8:

What constitutes physical activity?

Physical activity is defined as any activity that requires movement of the body or limbs and expends energy. Being physically active has many health benefits for older people and their carers and is not just the domain of younger healthy people.

The National Physical Activity Guidelines for Australians recommend:

- putting together at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity on most, if not all, days of the week. The 30 minutes of moderate activity does not need to be performed in one session and could be made up of three 10 minutes sessions over the period of the day (moderate intensity activity will cause a slight but noticeable increase in breathing and heart rate).

The degree to which a physical activity contributes towards health benefits depends on the individual's health. Each person has a baseline level of physical activity, which his or her body is capable of without causing undue stress. Therefore, different levels of physical activity could be classed as moderate for different people.

- For healthy active older people, 30 minutes of brisk walking or resistance training would be performing physical activity at a moderate level.
- For somebody beginning to experience medical problems but still able to walk to the local shops, taking part in an exercise group twice weekly and gardening or walking on the other days would be meeting the above recommendations.
- For frailer older people, even simple activities such as standing up from a chair, or walking 10 metres with assistance to the toilet would be performing physical activity at a moderate level. For these people even increasing what they are doing a little each day or attempting to maintain what they are able to do would be of benefit.

Mrs Jones is a 96 year old woman who still lives at home on her own. She is visited regularly by a council home care worker. Mrs Jones refuses to go out to organised activities such as day centres but wants to go for walks. The council has negotiated with Mrs Jones that they would take her for a short walk on their regular visits. This allows Mrs Jones to get out in the sunshine, take in the garden and undertake regular activity. The council worker has noticed an improvement in Mrs Jones' physical and mental health.

Physical activity can be divided into three broad areas:

- structured/formal physical activity: programs run by a physiotherapist or qualified fitness instructor and conducted in a group or individual format
- incidental activity: activity performed as part of the person's normal daily routine, for example, walking around the house, housework, dressing
- physical activity related to recreational pursuits, for example, bowls, golf, bocce, dancing.

Examples of physical activities

There are a wide variety of activities that can enhance physical activity for older people. Some examples are listed below. **All of these activities could be modified for older people with higher or lower levels of ability and function.**

For active older people:

- tai chi, strength training, exercise classes, water aerobics
- bowls, bocce, golf, swimming
- line dancing, ballroom dancing, other forms of dancing
- brisk walking outdoors, walking to local shops instead of using the car, walking as part of a group
- at home: cooking, vacuuming, sweeping, cleaning windows, changing the sheets on the bed
- in the garden: mowing lawns, weeding, planting, raking, digging
- climbing stairs instead of taking the lift or escalator
- shopping
- looking after their sexual health.

For older people with intermediate health problems affecting their level of participation in physical activity:

- formal exercise classes or an individual exercise program (strengthening or balance or endurance exercises, may be performed standing or sitting, although generally greater benefits are associated with exercises in standing)
- at home: making the bed each day, tidying, putting groceries away, cooking
- in the garden: lighter activities such as pruning roses or bushes, watering, weeding, planting in raised garden beds
- supervised hydrotherapy program
- playing and interacting with young children
- competitive games such as darts or bowls (may need to be modified if bending is a difficulty).

For frailer older people:

- formal supervised exercise classes or individual exercise programs (for example, designed by a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist)
- walking as much as possible as part of the everyday routine (smaller walks more regularly can be of benefit)
- trying to walk a little further than currently or a little more often
- showering and dressing as independently as possible
- practising sit to stand transfers
- at home: washing and drying the dishes, folding clothes
- in the garden: potting plants at a table, watering raised garden beds.

Encouraging physical activity

- Encourage older people to be as active every day in as many ways as they can. This is important as it can result in a benefit to their health. A person can perform physical activity as part of their usual activities, it does not need to be performed as part of a formal exercise group or program or as a 30 minute block of activity.
- Take time to discuss with older people their previous hobbies and activities, as well as their current interests in terms of physical activity. This may identify activities of greater personal interest and relevance, which may influence longer term participation.

References

Bauman, A, Bellew, B, Vita, P, Brown, W & Owen, N (2002) *Getting Australia active: towards better practice for the promotion of physical activity*. Melbourne, Australia: National Public Health Partnership.

Department of Health and Ageing (1999) *National physical activity guidelines for Australians*. Canberra. Available at <http://www.health.gov.au/pubhlth/publicat/document/physguide.pdf>

Physical activity can be fun and can be incorporated into daily activities.