

TEN FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS BY OLDER ADULTS ABOUT PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

FAQ 1: WHY SHOULD I BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE?

Response: There are many reasons you should build physical activity into your everyday life. Regular physical activity can help to improve quality of life in old age. Physical activity can help you stay active and engaged with your family and community. It can help you to manage or postpone some of the chronic diseases and conditions many of us have come to expect from old age. Aging does not have to be something that “happens to us” - on the contrary, being physically active can help us to play a more active role in our own aging. Physical activity can help us to live happier, healthier, and more productive lives.

Advice to exercise professionals: For many years, exercise professionals have tended to focus on the health or medical benefits of exercise and physical activity when trying to motivate sedentary individuals to become more active. For some individuals motives such as decreasing cholesterol levels, improving cardiac output, and increasing bone mineral density are effective motivators, but for many seniors they are not. As an exercise professional you should also stress that regular physical activity can be fun, can increase quality of life, and can help seniors continue to do the things that they like to do. In chapter 4 Diane Whaley and Agnes Schrider describe a number of evidence- based strategies that can be used to help motivate people to be physically active. It is doubtful that a single motivational strategy will work for all older adults. Exercise professionals should ensure that they are familiar with a variety of different motivational strategies in order to find the technique that works best for each of their clients.

FAQ 2: HOW MUCH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY DO I NEED?

Response: Ideally, you should aim to do at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic activity per week as well as two days per week of resistance exercises. However, start by doing what you can, and gradually look for ways to do more. If you have not been active for a while, start out slowly. After several weeks or months, build up your activities—do them longer and more often.

Advice to exercise professionals: In chapters 2, 3, 5, and 9 specific guidelines and recommendations regarding the quantity and quality of physical activity needed to ensure significant outcomes are discussed in detail. It is important for all exercise professionals to know and understand these guidelines. The current Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans summarize the best available scientific recommendations and we should certainly be prepared to summarize this information for our clients. However, it is important to understand that, for many older adults, 150 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic activity per week can be an extremely intimidating target that may leave them discouraged or unwilling to even try to increase their physical activity. As an exercise professional it is important that you help older clients understand that it is perfectly acceptable to gradually increase physical activity levels starting at easily achievable, non-threatening levels, and slowly increasing as the older adult becomes more comfortable with exercise and physical activity.

FAQ 3: WHAT IS THE BEST EXERCISE FOR OLDER ADULTS?

Response: There is no single best exercise that works for all older persons. Depending on how you define it, “old age” can cover as much as a fifty year age span, ranging from 50 to 100 years of age and older. For this reason, it is impossible to recommend single set of activities that is best for all older persons. Some seniors can run marathons or compete in triathlons, whereas others may be more comfortable walking, gardening or doing tai chi. Still others will get their exercise in a chair or in bed! The most important thing is to do regardless of your age is to avoid inactivity. The specific type of physical activity will always vary from person to person. A good idea is to select activities you enjoy. If possible, mixing up activities that promote stamina, strength, flexibility and balance is a good idea.

Advice to exercise professionals: The best exercise or physical activity program is the one that your clients are willing and able to do regularly, that they enjoy, and that adds to their quality of life. For some individuals this will be a structured group exercise program at the local senior center or YMCA, but for others it will be something much less structured, possibly involving activities such as healthy commuting, gardening, or walking the dog. Many exercise professionals grew up enjoying games and sports and are extremely comfortable “working out” in

traditional exercise environments. It is important to remember that not all older adults have enjoyed similar positive experiences with traditional exercise programs. Work with your clients to understand their goals, aspirations and personal preferences. For some individuals, identifying options for active living (see Chapter 3) may be a much more successful strategy than simply referring an individual to an exercise program at a local fitness center or community agency. An extremely important aspect of your role as an exercise professional is to help your clients to identify the physical activity program that's right for them (see chapter 9).

FAQ 4: HOW MANY TIMES A WEEK SHOULD I EXERCISE?

Response: Generally it is better to spread physical activity out throughout the week with a goal of being active on at least 3-5 days per week. By choosing activities that you enjoy, that are convenient and affordable, you may be able to find a way to be active on almost all days of the week. Try to mix up your physical activity program so you are not doing the same thing everyday. On some days you might go for a walk in your neighborhood with a friend or family member, on other days you might take advantage of a more structured exercise program at the senior center or church. Many people find that wearing a step counter can help them keep track of their activity levels. On days where you have not accumulated many steps, an after dinner walk can help you maintain your commitment to maintain an active lifestyle.

Advice to exercise professionals: As an exercise professional one of the most important things you can do for your clients is to empower them to be independently physically active and not to depend solely on you for their physical activity. Relatively few people have the time or desire to participate in a structured exercise program seven days a week. You should work with your clients to help them develop activities that they can do on their own time and in their own space. By helping seniors understand that there are many different ways to be active, you can help them develop a well-rounded, personalized activity program that selects from a menu of physical activity choices and helps them to be active on most if not all days of the week.

FAQ 5: I HAVE NOT EXERCISED FOR MANY YEARS, WHERE SHOULD I START?

Response: Forget the old saying “no pain, no gain” – it is simply not true! Too many of us learned in childhood that physical activity has to be painful or exhausting if it is going to do us any good. There are many excellent options for those of us who cannot or do not want to exercise vigorously. Walking is a wonderful way to increase your activity level. Stretching, tai chi and water exercise are also good options. For example, the Arthritis Foundation offers excellent aqua exercise programs designed specially those with arthritis and joint disorders. Gardening and working outdoors can also be a good form of physical activity. Remember - the most important thing is not what you do - rather - it is most important to avoid complete inactivity.

Advice to exercise professionals: Prescribing exercise and physical activity is as much an art as it is a science. The most successful exercise professionals are those that have mastered both of these elements. Simply informing clients about the current scientific guidelines may not be sufficient to motivate them to change their behavior. Understanding some of the principles of behavioral change discussed in chapter 4 can help you develop greater insight into how to identify the right place for an individual to start on their journey towards an active lifestyle. Many years ago when I was a young assistant professor, my mother called me from her home in England and asked me to help her with her wish to be more physically active. At that time my mom was in her early sixties, a widow living alone, working full-time as a teacher. Mom told me that she knew that she was supposed to do thirty minutes of aerobic exercise at least three times a week, but by the time she got home from a long day at school she was much too tired to imagine doing 30 minutes of physical activity. For her, the current physical activity guidelines seemed like an impossible mountain to climb. In my advice to mom I suggested that when she got home from work, before she took off her coat, she ask herself a simple question; “Do I have the energy to walk to the shops at the end of the road?” The shops were about 100 yards from her home and she often walked there to buy milk and other groceries. If the answer to the question was “yes” she simply had to walk to the shops and come back. If the answer was “no” it was perfectly fine to take off her coat and relax. I asked her to mark her wall calendar each day that she decided to walk to the corner store. We agreed that I would call back in a couple of weeks (this was before the era of Skype and cheap international phone calls). Two weeks later when I called back, the first words out of her mouth were “I had three check marks on the calendar last week and four this week.” She

was ecstatic; she had broken through a barrier. A few weeks later I suggested that when she got to the corner store, she ask herself another question; “Am I ready to go back home, or do I want to walk around the block?” Twenty years later my mom is an active and energetic eighty-year-old lady who still lives alone in the same house. She maintains a routine of regular physical activity that she credits for her independence and high quality of life. Her physically active lifestyle consists mostly of walking in her neighborhood and doing calisthenics and exercises at home. I am not suggesting that the strategy I used with my mom will work for all seniors. However, it is clear that if we are to be successful in motivating sedentary individuals to change their behavior, we will need to pay close attention to their goals and preferences as we work with them to develop a program that is meaningful and that helps them to overcome their personal obstacles and barriers.

FAQ 6: WILL PHYSICAL ACTIVITY HELP TO REDUCE MY RISK FOR SPECIFIC DISEASES AND CONDITIONS?

Response: Physical inactivity is a major risk factor for many physical and psychological conditions. Sedentary living is associated with heart disease, obesity, diabetes and many other conditions. Inactivity is also linked to low self-esteem and psychological depression. Regular physical activity can positively influence all of the above conditions. Many studies have shown that activity can also help slow the loss of muscle and bone mass that often occurs with advancing age. In addition to these physical and psychological benefits, physical activity can often have significant social benefits. Many seniors enjoy group exercise programs where they have a chance to interact with fellow exercisers of all ages. Even for those individuals who prefer to be active alone or with a partner, physical activity can help them retain the strength and stamina necessary for playing an active role in everyday life.

Advice to exercise professionals: One of the areas in which more scientific research is needed pertains to the specific mode, intensity, and duration of exercise and physical activity needed to bring about a particular clinical outcome. When approached by an older person with a specific disease or condition it is especially important for an exercise professional to recommend an exercise or activity program that has been shown to be effective in the treatment and management of that particular condition. In chapter six, Bo Fernhall, Abbi Lane, and Huimin Yan provide an overview of physical activity options for older adults with special issues and concerns. Similarly, in

chapter 9, Michael and Nicole Rogers propose some strategies to help older adults identify the program that is best for them. It is important for exercise professionals to have a good sense of who the target audience is for a particular exercise or physical activity program and feel comfortable discussing the advantages and disadvantages of a specific program with their individual clients. For example, when approached by an older woman with osteoporosis who was looking for an exercise program to increase her bone mineral density, it would probably not be optimal to recommend a low intensity walking and calisthenics program conducted at the local senior center. Exercise professionals should familiarize themselves with the variety of exercise and physical activity options available in their community and be prepared to work together with their clients to help identify the most appropriate choice for each individual. The online EASY Screening Tool <http://www.easyforyou.info/> is an excellent resource for exercise professionals wishing to tailor physical activity to the needs of a particular client.

FAQ 7: DO I NEED TO SEE A DOCTOR BEFORE BEGINNING A PROGRAM OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY?

Response: Regular visits to your doctor are always a good idea. In an ideal world, everyone would discuss any proposed change in activity level with his or her doctor. Unfortunately, for many Americans regular visits to physicians are not always possible. Not having a doctor should not be an excuse for inactivity and sedentary living. The vast majority of older Americans can find a safe and effective activity program that works for them. If you do not have a doctor, you should consider consulting an exercise specialist or other health professionals. In most communities you can visit a gym, YMCA or health club to get advice about what kind of activity program is best for you.

Advice to exercise professionals: While there are some risks associated with participation in regular physical activity, the risks associated with a sedentary lifestyle far exceed them. Physical activity risks are related to level of intensity, with lower-intensity physical activity being associated with the lowest risk. Low-intensity physical activity reduces the risks of injury and muscle soreness and may be perceived as less threatening than moderate-to-high intensity routines. While lower risk is associated with lower intensity exercise, the consensus is that moderate physical activity has a better risk/benefit ratio, and moderate intensity physical activity should be the goal for older

adults. Although having an ongoing dialogue with a health care provider is recommended, the involvement of a primary care provider prior to beginning a program of physical activity depends on a person's health condition and the level of intensity and mode of physical activity. The ACSM Best Practice Statement recommends that before starting or increasing their level of physical activity, older adults should have a strategy for risk management and prevention of activity-related injuries. The most important strategy is to start with low-intensity physical activity and increase intensity gradually. Whenever possible, physical activity bouts should include a warm-up and cool-down component. Increasing muscular strength around weight-bearing joints, particularly the knee, also reduces the risk of musculoskeletal injury

FAQ 8: IS EXERCISE SAFE?

Response: Yes! Almost everyone can find a safe and effective exercise program tailored towards his or her health status, physical activity goals, and personal preferences. It is far more risky to your health to be sedentary than it is to begin a program of light-to-moderate intensity physical activity. The greatest risk is that your muscles will be sore in the first few weeks of an exercise program. There are some things that you can do to reduce these risks. Learn to read your body's signals. On days that your body feels tired or weary - take it easy. On good days, take advantage of your body and enjoy yourself! Once we learn how to read our body's signals and respect its needs, we get a better sense for how to adjust our activity programs as we grow older. Very few individual will be able to (or would want to) run or dance as energetically in their seventies as they could in their twenties. Many believe that the secret of successful aging is learning how to adjust to changing needs and circumstances while remaining an active and vibrant member of society.

Advice to exercise professionals: While some experts and organizations recommend having a physical examination and exercise test before beginning or increasing physical activity, exercise tests have a substantial level of false positives for heart disease that may lead to unnecessary further testing and in turn increase the risk to older adults. Requiring a physician approval may impose a barrier that reduces the number of people who will begin a program. Because all physical activity is associated with a slight increase in acute injury risk, this small

increase must be weighed against the more substantial benefits associated with long-term physical activity. For healthy, asymptomatic adults of any age, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force does not recommend any type of cardiac screening (ECG, exercise test) before the initiation of physical activity. Although ongoing dialogue between a patient and their health professional is always desirable, the ACSM Best Practice statement recommends that pre-exercise screening by a physician should not be a prerequisite for participation in low-intensity physical activity. For sedentary older people who are asymptomatic, low-intensity physical activity can be safely initiated regardless of whether or not an older person has had a recent medical evaluation. As an exercise professional you will need to work within the rules and regulations set by your employers and the facilities in which you work, however, you should not assume that mandatory pre-exercise screening is always necessary, especially for relatively healthy, community dwelling seniors.

FAQ 9: AM I TOO OLD TO EXERCISE?

Response: No! You are never too old to exercise! Physical activity has been shown to be of benefit for individuals of all ages including persons as old as ninety and one hundred years of age. Many people just like you are active on a daily basis. You can find a physical activity program that you will enjoy, that will make you feel better, and that will increase your quality of life. Think about what you most like to do in life and what you hope to gain from being active. An exercise professional can help you to develop a physical activity program that will help you to achieve these goals.

Advice to exercise professionals: It is increasingly clear that beneficial effects of regular physically activity can be observed at all stages of the life course ranging from the very young to the oldest old. In recent years, many excellent and well publicized studies have focused our attention on the benefits of regular physical activity in those cohorts of seniors who were previously thought to be "too old" or "too frail" to partake in physical activity. There are a number of reasons why the frail and the oldest-old tend to be the most sedentary members of society. First, many of the oldest old do not think of themselves as candidates for physical activity. They are unaware of the many benefits that can accrue to them if they increase their physical activity levels, and they do not realize that

many people just like them enjoy activity on a regular basis. Second, for many years exercise and physical activity professionals were reluctant to expose the oldest old to the rigors of even the most modest physical activity regimens. It is only recently that professional organizations and Institutional Review Boards have begun to recognize that the benefits of physical activity are much greater than the very small risks they pose. Third, many of the exercise and physical activity programs traditionally employed with the middle aged and young-old are poorly suited for use with the frail and the oldest old. However, there are now an ample number of effective evidence-based programs that have been proven to work in frail and older adult populations. In the chapters of this book you will have read about many different strategies that are available to you to help engage the oldest members of society in safe, effective and enjoyable physical activity.

FAQ 10: DO I NEED SPECIAL CLOTHING AND EQUIPMENT?

Response: No! Special clothing and equipment are seldom needed. Safe and effective physical activity can be performed wearing comfortable street shoes and loose fitting everyday clothes. Effective strength training can be achieved with inexpensive equipment such as elastic bands and water filled jugs.

Advice to exercise professionals: Many older adults have significant discretionary income and are ready and willing to spend it on club memberships, exercise equipment and clothing, however, many others are in less fortunate financial circumstances and do not have a lot of money to invest in physical activity. I encourage exercise professionals to be sensitive to the resources available to their older clients and to tailor their advice and recommendations accordingly. In my own clinical experience, probably the most important equipment needed to maintain an active life style is a well-fitting pair of shoes which are both comfortable and provide adequate cushioning to minimize the risk of muscle and joint injuries.

ONLINE RESOURCES FOR OLDER ADULTS INTERESTED IN INCREASING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY:

Department of Health and Human Services Physical Activity Guidelines website materials:

PAG Homepage: <http://www.health.gov/paguidelines/>

Be Active Your Way: <http://www.health.gov/paguidelines/adultguide/default.aspx>

PAG Blog: <http://www.health.gov/paguidelines/blog/default.aspx>

PAG Toolkit: <http://www.health.gov/paguidelines/toolkit.aspx>

National Institutes of Health Resources:

Exercise & Physical Activity: Your Everyday Guide from the National Institute on Aging:

<http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation/Publications/ExerciseGuide/>

NIH Senior Health: <http://nihseniorhealth.gov/>

Administration on Community Living:

Evidence-Based Prevention Program

http://www.aoa.gov/AoA_Programs/HPW/Evidence_Based/index.aspx

President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition:

Fitness.Gov <http://www.fitness.gov/>

National Physical Activity Plan:

National Plan Homepage <http://physicalactivityplan.org/>

National Plan Mission and Vision: <http://www.physicalactivityplan.org/vision.htm>

ACSM/AMA:

Exercise is Medicine Homepage <http://www.exerciseismedicine.org/>

Online Exercise Screening Tool:

EASY Screening Tool <http://www.easyforyou.info/>

National Council on the Aging

Center for Healthy Aging Homepage <http://www.healthyagingprograms.org/>

Evidence-Based Programs <http://www.healthyagingprograms.org/content.asp?sectionid=32>