Current levels of physical activity in older adults

The information presented here was gathered after 2011 and is therefore based on the latest UK physical activity recommendations from the Chief Medical Officer’s report Start Active, Stay Active unless stated otherwise. These guidelines recommend at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity a week.

England
Based on the results of the 2012 Health Survey for England the proportion of older adults meeting physical activity recommendations was:
• 57% of men and 52% of women aged 65-74 years
• 43% of men and 21% of women aged 75-84 years
• 11% of men and 7% of women aged 85+ years.

14% of men and 25% of women aged 65+ had a walking speed of less than 0.5 metres per second, slower than the required speed of 1.2 metres per second to cross at traffic lights.

Walking ability further declined with age as 36% of men and 56% of women aged 85+ noted walking difficulties.

Scotland
Based on the 2012 Scottish Health Survey, the proportion of older adults meeting the physical activity recommendations was:
• 56% of men aged 65-74 years
• 31% of men aged 75+ years
• 52% of women aged 65-74 years
• 21% of women aged 75+ years.

When looking at walking sessions of at least 10 minutes of more:
• men aged 75+ reported walking for only 42 minutes a week
• women aged 75+ reported walking for only 12 minutes a week.

Wales
The Welsh Health Survey 2012 collected data based on the previous physical activity recommendations for adults in Wales of at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on five days a week. The proportion of older adults meeting these recommendations was:
• 23% of men aged 65-74 years
• 17% of men aged 75+ years
• 15% of women aged 65-74 years
• 9% of women aged 75+ years.
The British Heart Foundation is a registered charity in England and Wales (225971) and Scotland (SC039426).

Disease prevention and improvement in disease symptoms
Physical activity can assist in reversing the decline of physical function even in later, later life.

- higher levels of cardiovascular fitness and physical function
- improved disease risk factor profiles
- lower body weight
- lower incidence of chronic non-communicable diseases, coronary heart disease and stroke.

Those who are overweight or obese can still gain health benefits from physical activity even if they don’t lose weight.

Physical activity can have a beneficial effect on symptoms caused by several diseases including:
- reducing joint pain in those with arthritis and osteoarthritis
- decreasing symptoms of breathlessness in those with COPD
- decreasing age related bone loss and increasing bone repair.

Falls prevention
Falls are a major source of injury for older adults and entail substantial healthcare costs.

Structured physical activity programmes aimed at improving postural stability are most effective at preventing falls.

As balance impairment is one of the main risk factors for falls, regular physical activity can be used to maintain balance.

Mental wellbeing
Physical activity is associated with:
- improved perceptions of mental wellbeing
- increased self-esteem
- improved ability to cope with stress.

Symptoms of some clinically defined mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety may potentially be alleviated by physical activity.

Physical activity lowers the risk of dementia and improves day to day cognitive functioning.

Quality and quantity of sleep can be improved through physical activity.

Maintaining mobility
Medium to high intensity resistance training can improve everyday physical function such as:
- walking speed
- time taken to stand up from a chair.

Cardiorespiratory exercise performed regularly:
- offsets declines in endurance
- reduces general breathlessness and fatigue.

Even those already in nursing or residential care can benefit from physical activity, mostly in the form of rehabilitation exercise.

References

For a complete list of references used in the health outcomes of physical activity in older adults and for more detailed information please see the BHFNC evidence briefing on physical activity for older adults available from www.bhfactive.org.uk/older-adults

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