Fact Sheet

Factors influencing physical activity in older adults

Physical activity is a complex behaviour in older adults which is influenced by a wide range of factors. These factors operate at individual, social and environmental levels. Some may be modifiable, for example, social support or attitudes. Others are fixed, such as sex or ethnicity.

Biological and demographic factors

- Men tend to be more active than women.
- As age increases physical activity participation decreases.
- The decline in physical activity participation with age is higher among:
  - minority ethnic groups
  - those from lower socio-economic backgrounds
  - those who have lower levels of educational attainment.
- People living alone are more likely to have lower physical activity levels than their married peers.

Psychological factors

- Physical activity participation is positively affected by an older adult's:
  - belief in their ability to be active
  - confidence in their physical abilities
  - perceptions of risk
  - general beliefs, attitudes and values.
- Physical activity participation is negatively affected by:
  - fear of falling or over exertion
  - concern for personal safety during the activity.

Social factors

- Mutual trust, shared values and feelings of community among neighbours are linked to increased physical activity levels.
- Physical activity participation is influenced by 'significant others' such as health professionals, physical activity instructors, care givers, family and friends. Opinions and support given from these 'significant others' can have both a positive and negative affect on physical activity participation.

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Environmental factors

- Older adults are more likely than other age groups to not go out or participate in an activity, eg, walking to the shops, for fear of crime.
- Pedestrians are most likely to be victims of a road traffic accident, and many older adults are unable to cross a road within the allotted a time of a traffic light controlled crossing.
- A lack of transport is frequently cited by older adults as a reason they are unable to take part in activities.
- Older adults have reported that having somewhere interesting to go motivates them to walk more.
- A lack of suitable opportunities and settings for physical activity is often reported by this age group.

Sedentary behaviours: levels and health outcomes in older adults

Sedentary behaviour refers to a group of behaviours that occur while sitting or lying down and typically require very low energy expenditure. The low energy requirements distinguish sedentary behaviours from other behaviours that also occur while seated, eg, chair-based exercise, but which require greater effort and energy expenditure. Sedentary behaviour is not defined simply as a lack of physical activity; it is a separate behaviour in its own right.

Levels of sedentary behaviours

- Older adults are the most sedentary population group.
- Many older adults spend ten or more hours each day sitting or lying down.
  - For example, according to the Health Survey for England 2008, men aged 65-74 years spend 10.3 hours per day sedentary, while women spend 10 hours per day sedentary. This rose to 11 hours per day by age 75 years for both men and women.
- Self-report measures and objective activity monitoring indicates sedentary time rises sharply from the age of 70 years onwards.

Health outcomes of sedentary behaviours

- Sedentary time is a significant risk factor for poor health regardless of the amount of time spent active.
- Sedentary behaviour increases risk of disability as it:
  - negatively impacts on loss of muscle functions and mobility
  - can contribute to low daily energy expenditure and increased risk of obesity
  - contributes to the decline in cognition
  - may have a negative impact on the risk of falls*.

Benefits of physical activity for reducing the impact of a predominately sedentary lifestyle

- Among the frailest of older adults, physical activity and movement that promotes circulation will assist in limiting the complications of immobility and a sedentary lifestyle.
- Physical activity promotes a reduction in:
  - blood clots, specifically those in deep veins like the calf or thigh
  - swelling of the feet or lower legs caused by the accumulation of fluid
  - thickening of the joint tissues leading to deformity
  - pressure sores
  - severe constipation.

References

For a complete list of references used in this fact sheet 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**

*One additional reference was used in this fact sheet: Thibaud M, Bloch F, Toumoux-Facon C, Breque C, Rigaud AS, Dugue B, Kemoun G. Impact of physical activity and sedentary behaviour on fall risks in older people: a systematic review and meta-analysis of observational studies. Eur Rev Aging Phys Act. 2012; 9:5-15.

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for Physical Activity and Health, Loughborough University

T: 01509 226421 F: 01509 226420

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