Physical Activity

Help the Aged
Policy Statement 2008
Overview

This briefing explains why physical activity is so important for older people and describes the role Help the Aged is playing in promoting physical activity as a way to maintain good health and independence in later life.

Physical activity can help prevent the onset of certain medical conditions and improve emotional well-being. Increasing and improving opportunities for participation in physical activity programmes will enable more older people to look forward to a healthy later life.

Background

- Current government guidelines suggest that all adults should do at least 30 minutes of moderately intense exercise on five or more days a week.¹
- Physical activity decreases with age: seven out of ten men and eight out of ten women aged 75+ are inactive. Regular exercise helps maintain mobility and independent living.²
- For physically active people the risk of premature death is reduced by 20–30 per cent and the risk of major chronic disease (such as coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes and cancer) by up to 50 per cent.³
- According to the 2006 Active People Survey, 57 per cent of men and 67.6 per cent of women aged 55+ do not achieve three sessions of 30 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise each week.⁴
- Beside the human costs of inactivity in terms of mortality, morbidity and quality of life, the cost of inactivity in England has been estimated (in Choosing Activity: see below) to be £8.2 billion annually. This excludes the contribution of physical inactivity to obesity, the overall cost of which could run to £6.6–£7.4 billion per year, according to recent estimates.⁵

The promotion of physical activity has received attention from the government in recent years. The National Service Framework, Standard 8: The promotion of health and active life in older age (2001) identified the benefits of physical activity for older people as promoting health and independence. In particular, the framework identified physical activity as a valuable means of reducing the risk of falls. A growing body of evidence details the positive impact physical activity has on the development of other health conditions such as coronary heart disease and high blood pressure. In 2004, the Chief Medical Officer's report on physical activity and health, At Least Five a Week,⁶ set out the recommended levels of physical activity for adults:

‘Older people should take particular care to keep moving and retain their mobility through daily activity. Additionally, specific activities that promote improved strength, co-ordination and balance are particularly beneficial for older people.’⁷

Better Health in Old Age (2004)⁸ suggested that, despite these recommendations, opportunities for taking part in physical activity needed to be developed and should include marginalised groups of older people such as those living alone, those who are socially isolated and those with specific needs based on culture and race. Help the Aged welcomed these proposals, as members of these particular groups are statistically less likely to take up physical activity opportunities. However, no practical assistance was offered in developing these services until the publication of the White Paper Choosing Health later in 2004.⁹

Following the White Paper Choosing Health and the related Choosing Activity action plan, a number of initiatives were developed which included some focus on increasing the physical activity of older people. The government-funded Local Exercise Action Pilots (LEAP) and the Moving More Often national training programme for professionals and volunteers working with older people, which was delivered by the British Heart Foundation National Centre for Physical Activity and Health.

In 2005, Help the Aged made strides in challenging perceptions of active ageing and developing opportunities for older people to participate in physical activity programmes. An exercise bursary scheme trained over 50 people in the UK to

---

² Choosing Health, Department of Health 2004.
³ ibid.
⁴ Active People Survey, Sport England, December 2006.
⁵ Choosing Activity, 2005, Department of Health.
⁷ ibid.
⁸ Better Health in Old Age, Department of Health 2004.
⁹ Choosing Health, Department of Health 2004.
deliver falls prevention exercise programmes
within healthcare institutions and the community.
In collaboration with postural stability experts,
the Charity also produced Be Strong, Be Steady,
an exercise video for frail older people aimed
at improving strength and balance and thereby
reducing the risk of falls.

A New Ambition for Old Age (2006): programme
9: healthy ageing further promoted the value of
activities such as exercise classes and dancing in
maintaining health and independence in addition
to increasing social interaction and improving
emotional well-being. This report by the National
Clinical Director for Older People, Professor Ian
Philp, detailed aims of improving physical fitness
by encouraging and communicating the benefits of
moderate regular exercise for older people. Help
the Aged welcomed these recommendations, in
particular the recognition that issues including lack
of equipment, foot-care, oral health, continence
care, low vision and hearing services represent
barriers which must be addressed if older people
are to undertake more physical activity.

As the issue of physical activity and older people
gathered momentum, Help the Aged took on a
wider role in helping older people to engage in
opportunities to exercise. In 2006, the Charity
produced a new exercise video and DVD, Step to
the Future, based on research with older people
and employing an older person to present the
activities. The Charity has also been instrumental in
the National Coalition for Active Ageing, which has
represented older people at an international level.

Further research from Sport England in 2006
provided an updated report for the UK on the
participation levels of recently retired people in
physical activity, as well as identifying some of the
barriers to physical activity. It is interesting to note
that many individuals placed greater value on ‘active
chores’ – for example, gardening or DIY – than
on strenuous exercise, with the result that many
did not realise that they were technically ‘inactive’.
In addition to a lack of understanding over what
constituted exercise, barriers to participation
included health problems, cost and lack of local
opportunities.10

Help the Aged has also been highlighting the impact
and legacy of the London 2012 Olympics for older
people, through volunteering opportunities and
access to facilities. The Olympics represents a huge
opportunity to take the physical activity message to
all people of all ages; it is vital that older people are
included in any targeted initiatives.

National Coalition for Active Ageing

In 2005, the National Coalition for Active Ageing
(NCAA) was established as Help the Aged and
the British Heart Foundation National Centre for
Physical Activity & Health joined forces to address
the issues of physical activity for older people. Over
20 key national organisations are represented in the
Coalition, which aims to provide a single coherent
voice on the promotion of physical activity for older
people, influencing national policy, strategy and
programmes on physical activity.

Help the Aged believes that promoting the value
of physical activity both among older people
themselves and to those that provide opportunities
for them to engage in activities will encourage
physical activity to become a normal part of ageing.
NCAA helps meet these objectives and allows for
work to take place nationally and internationally.
See the NCAA position statement for more
information.

10 Understanding Participation in Sport: what determines sports
participation among recently retired people? Sport England,
February 2006.
Summary

Physical activity helps people remain healthy and independent at any stage of life. However, over the last five years significant steps have been taken to promote the benefits of physical activity to older people. The benefits are clear, not only for achieving a better sense of well-being but also for preventing the onset of certain medical conditions associated with later life.

However, while progress has been made in the last five years, further action is needed to ensure that all older people understand what is meant by physical activity, can access support and facilities to enable them to engage in it, and are encouraged to do so.

The Help the Aged position

Help the Aged believes that physical activity is key to helping older people maintain their independence and mobility in later life, with access to high-quality, accessible facilities.

Help the Aged is calling for:

- better provision of local exercise opportunities for older adults that are appropriate, high-quality and accessible to all older people in the local community;
- government incentives to encourage more exercise trainers to teach older people in a variety of settings;
- existing resources for practitioners and older people to be made sustainable for older people wishing to participate in physical activity who currently have no opportunities available to them;
- older people to be fairly represented in the London 2012 Olympic Games and to be among those who benefit from the Games' legacy.

Practical resources from Help the Aged

- **Step to the Future**: an aerobic endurance and strength exercise video and DVD
- **Be Strong, Be Steady**: strength and balance exercise video for falls prevention
- **Strength and Balance Exercises for Healthy Ageing**: ring-bound book of home exercises for falls prevention
- **How to Thrive Past 55**: health guide containing much information on different forms of exercise and how much is needed (LifeGuides series, publication date February 2008).

More details available from www.helptheaged.org.uk/slipstrips/practitioners or healthyageing@helptheaged.org.uk, or, for placing an order, the Help the Aged Publishing department (020 7239 1946 or email publications@helptheaged.org.uk).

January 2008

WE WILL fight to free disadvantaged older people in the UK and overseas from POVERTY, ISOLATION and NEGLECT