

## Helping Canadians with Disability/Chronic Disease Get Physically Active: Tip Sheets for Intermediaries

*For Canadians with a disability, regular physical activity may be even more important than it is for the rest of the population. For a person with a disability, an active lifestyle can open doors to increased health, social inclusion and self-empowerment - doors which might otherwise remain closed. Access to physical activity can eliminate the likelihood of acquiring secondary health conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure or heart disease. Being active builds resiliency and can provide an all-important outlet for a person with a disability.*

*These tip sheets are designed to provide general information in support of Canada's Physical Activity Guidelines, developed by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology.*

# CEREBRAL PALSY

## GENERAL INFORMATION

### Facts and Figures

- Cerebral palsy generally appears at birth or within the first three years of life;
- Damage to motor neurons in the brain affect coordination and muscle strength;
- Approximately 1 in 500 newborns are affected with symptoms ranging from mild to severe;
- There are over 50,000 Canadians with cerebral palsy.

### What is Cerebral Palsy?

Cerebral Palsy (CP) is a term used to explain a neurological condition which impacts muscle coordination and body movement. CP is regarded as a non-progressive condition brought about by an injury to the developing brain. That said, the effects of CP can change with time. It may be possible for children who have CP to gain sufficient hand control to ride a bike. Conversely, tight muscles in the hips and spines of growing children may require [orthopedic surgery](#). Exercise therefore is crucial for individuals with CP when it comes to maintaining or enhancing strength, flexibility and overall health.

CP occurs through a lack of oxygen to the brain of the infant during pregnancy, or as a result of a bump or fall. CP interferes with messages sent from the brain to the body, and vice versa.

The symptoms of CP can vary for every person. Some people may appear to be minimally affected, while others may be non-speaking and use mobility aids and personal attendant care to help with daily living.

## **Impact of Cerebral Palsy**

Physical activity can go a long way towards enhancing the health and outlook of a person with CP. These individuals have more to lose from being sedentary.

Based on which area or areas of the brain have been injured, a person with CP may experience any of the following. These challenges may in turn lead to other difficulties with eating, poor bowel or bladder control, pressure sores or breathing problems. For a person with CP, all of these difficulties can be well managed.

- Spasm or muscle tightness;
- Involuntary movement;
- Difficulty with gross motor skills including walking and running;
- Difficulty with fine motor skills including speaking and writing;
- Abnormal sensation and perception.

The injury to the brain which led to CP may in addition bring about a number of other conditions, including:

- Vision problems;
- Seizures;
- Learning disabilities;
- Hearing impairment.

## **Working with a Person with CP**

### **Tips for getting Active**

The benefits that an individual with CP can gain from physical activity will largely depend on their starting point, and the degree of effort which they are willing to put into an exercise program. The choice of physical activity should be matched with the individual's needs and their abilities. The individual will move and participate in their own way. The types of equipment which may assist a person with CP to participate in physical activity may include Manual, sport or power wheelchairs, canes, crutches, walkers, braces and orthotics.

Each and every individual should have the opportunity to get actively involved in community programs, fitness and health initiatives. The role of physical activity providers in creating a welcoming and safe environment to accommodate a person with CP can not be understated.

Its important to note that limbs which are affected through CP are not paralyzed, and that these limbs can feel cold, heat, pressure and pain. It should also be remembered that just because a person with CP may be unable to speak, it does not mean that they have nothing to say. The level of physical impairment experienced by a person with CP is not a reflection of their intelligence.

When working with an individual who has CP, consider the following:

- Create a welcoming environment – customer service focus;
- Ask the individual what their needs and interests are – never assume;
- Reminder: privacy/disclosure policies ensure individuals share information at their discretion and comfort;
- Focus on what the individual can do rather than what they cannot;

- Think safety first;
- Encourage the individual to consult with a medical professional prior to starting a physical activity program;
- Be patient and supportive;
- Consult with resource agencies with expertise in areas of inclusive physical activity – training or professional development materials may be beneficial;
- Ensure staff and volunteers receive adequate training to be able to deliver quality customer service, gain equipment knowledge/use and learn about available resources – on/off-site.

### **Teaching and Communication Technique**

- Offer assistance and support as required or when asked;
- Reminder – do not touch an individual or their assistive device or service animal without their consent;
- Create space for easy movement and participation;
- Match the individual with activities which meet their needs and abilities. Some individuals may be able to perform yoga or ride a bike, while for others, gentle aerobics may be enough;
- Make it fun – having fun and socializing are important benefits to physical activity experienced by people who are active;
- Develop activities at the level of the individual focussing on strength, endurance, balance and flexibility;
- When leading activities outdoors, ensure participants wear sun screen, protective clothing, sunglasses and a hat;
- Make it interesting – exercise and every day activities, such as gardening or walking a dog, can easily go together.

### **Physical Activity Tips and Modifications**

- Ask the individual to consult a medical practitioner prior to involvement;
- Provide a facility without barriers to participation, thus creating access to the venue, equipment or activity (this could include: accessible parking spaces, ramp access or flat access to the front door, remove obstacles in hallways – signage, garbage/recycling bins, automatic or wide frame doorways to enter/exit)
- Allocate additional staff or volunteers to the area where the participant will be taking part in an activity, where possible;
- Ask first, do not assume that the individual needs or would like help;
- Avoid slippery surfaces and raised obstructions;
- If available, provide adapted equipment;
- As with every individual, other considerations should be discussed (i.e. pain, fatigue and the individual's expectations).

**Resources:**

Ontario Cerebral Palsy Sports Association - [www.ocpsa.com](http://www.ocpsa.com)

Canadian Cerebral Palsy Sports Association - [www.ccpsa.ca](http://www.ccpsa.ca)

Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability – [www.ala.ca](http://www.ala.ca)

Variety Village - [www.varietylvillage.ca](http://www.varietylvillage.ca)

Ontario Federation for Cerebral Palsy: A Guide to Cerebral Palsy - [www.ofcp.ca/guide.php](http://www.ofcp.ca/guide.php)

Cerebral Palsy – Causes, Symptoms, Treatment, Diagnosis - <http://bodyandhealth.canada.com/condition/getcondition/cerebral-palsy>

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**Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability**

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