



## 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.*

## MOBILITY IMPAIRMENTS

### General Information

#### Facts and Figures

It is estimated that over 18 million people in Canada and the USA have a mobility impairment, according to the National Mobility Equipment Dealer's Association.

#### What is a Mobility Impairment?

Mobility is defined in the dictionary as:

*“The quality or state of being mobile, the movement of people, as from one social group, class or level to another. The means of approaching, entering, exiting, communicating with or making use of.”*

A mobility impairment can be defined as a disabling condition which requires an adaptation. A person who has a mobility impairment may use adaptive devices, or mobility aids such as canes, crutches, wheelchairs or artificial limbs.

In the context of disability, an individual's mobility could be affected as a result of any of, or a combination of the following, which may be congenital or traumatic, short term, progressive or permanent:

Spinal Cord Injuries (SCI); Paraplegia; Quadraplegia; Tetraplegia;  
Hemiplegia; Paralysis; Muscle weakness, injury, strain, sprain or brake;  
Rheumatoid arthritis; Cerebral Palsy; Muscular Dystrophy; Stroke;  
Acquired Brain Injury (ABI); Multiple Sclerosis (MD); Spina Bifida;  
Amputations; Age (infancy – aging); Pain; Sensation; Burns; Skin irritation;  
Fatigue; Visual ability; Balance; Coordination; Osteogenesis Imperfecta;  
Infection; Illness.

## **Impact of Mobility Impairments**

A person may experience a lower body Mobility Impairment, requiring use of a cane, wheelchair or walker, or an upper body impairment which may mean limited or no use of the upper extremities or hands. It is difficult to generalize about the functional abilities of persons with mobility impairments because of the broad variety of disabilities and different diagnoses. A person may have a temporary or a permanent mobility impairment. A temporary impairment, such as that brought about by a surgery or a broken bone, may impact a person's ability to walk at a similar pace as before, or to participate with ease in physical activity in ways they may have previously. Some individuals may use a walker in their day to day activities, but may rely on a wheelchair in order to participate in more rigorous physical activity.

An active lifestyle can greatly assist a person with a mobility impairment to manage and in some cases, even lessen the negative impacts associated with their condition. Regardless of their physical ability or degree of health, a person with a Mobility Impairment can benefit a great deal from regular physical activity. Even if an individual has difficulty with standing or walking, they can benefit through exercise. These individuals have more to lose from being sedentary.

Among other areas, a mobility impairment can impact, to varying extents:

- Object manipulation;
- Manual dexterity;
- Side to side movements or retrieval;
- Fine motor activities;
- Endurance;
- Physical abilities which vary from day to day.

## **Working with a Person who has a Mobility Impairment**

### **Tips for getting Active**

The benefits that an individual with a mobility impairment 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 a mobility impairment to participate in physical activity include a manual, sport or power wheelchair, a cane, crutches, walker, brace, orthotics, or prosthetics.

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 a mobility impairment can not be understated.

When working with a person who has a mobility impairment, 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;
- An individual's impaired mobility could have been the result of an accident, injury or progressive condition – 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;
- Ensure wide aisles and uncluttered work areas.

### **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 wheel or run a marathon, while for others, a slow walk 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, focusing on endurance, balance, strength and flexibility. Enhancing these areas can be helpful with everyday activities: i.e., walking or wheeling instead of driving, do-it-yourself house renovations, getting dressed or carrying groceries;
- 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:**

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

Variety Village – [www.varietyvillage.ca](http://www.varietyvillage.ca)

Physical and Mobility Impairments Facts News and Information -  
[www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22101330](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22101330)

National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association - [www.nmeda.com](http://www.nmeda.com)

Free Online Dictionary, Thesaurus and Encyclopedia -  
[www.thefreedictionary.com/mobility](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/mobility)

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

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