



# Age no barrier to

*Len Almond, Bob Laventure and Dr Matthew Almond outline their new guidelines on the promotion of physical activity with older people*

**A**t its 2006 annual conference, the BHF National Centre for Physical Activity and Health launched a consultation document on Guidelines for Promoting Physical Activity with Older Adults. This document was an attempt to provide more comprehensive guidance to all those working with older adults. This is particularly important because the older adult could be a very active 55-year-old woman, a 68-year-old man exercising daily with two medical conditions, a person who has never exercised for 40 years, an active 95-year-old woman living independently or a very frail 80-year-old man; the range is extensive. Yet, in the UK there is very little guidance to provide support in the promotion of more physical activity for older adults. For the purposes of this article we have focused on 50-65 year olds, because this is an important target group for all local authorities.

## **Why promote physical activity with older adults?**

A significant body of compelling scientific evidence

(CMO, 2005) indicates that regular physical activity can bring significant health benefits to people of all ages and abilities. Nevertheless, the main focus of physical activity promotion in the media and government departments is young people, followed by adults, and very little serious attention is devoted to older adults (50+), where the benefits of regular physical activity are much more substantial.

In addition to the 'prevention of major diseases' agenda, public policy has highlighted more recently the importance of promoting well-being, physical function, and retaining one's independence and mobility in the later years, enabling the older person to continue enjoying activities of daily living and to maintain their social networks

Although regular physical activity has been demonstrated to be critical for the promotion of health and function as people age, people over the age of 50 represent the most sedentary segment of the adult population (Active People survey 2006). Sedentary behaviour and low levels of physical activity contribute significantly to a major decline in functional capacity among older people, which

in turn can lead to limitations in everyday life. For older adults, strength, endurance, bone density and flexibility are all 'lost' at a rate of about 10 per cent per decade after the age of 40. Muscle power (the speed with which a muscle is used) is lost at an even faster rate of about 30 per cent per decade. However, the message is for everyone, not simply those who have lost functional ability. We need to present a positive physical activity message aimed at everyone.

Together, the evidence of functional decline and decreased levels of physical activity associated with ageing emphasise the high priority that needs to be placed on the importance of promoting physical activity to all older people.

However, there is a tendency to view the benefits of regular physical activity in terms of a medical model and this may account partially for the lack of real interest in promoting physical activity for all older adults. Perhaps a different perspective is to see the experience of physical activity in one's life as a way of flourishing and experiencing a real sense of well-being. What does this mean and what does it entail?

## **Flourishing: a new perspective on regular purposeful physical activity**

In this more positive perspective on the value of physical activity, we see the role of physical activity in promoting well-being in two ways:

1. Regular physical activity can help people to flourish and simply feel better.
2. Regular physical activity can help also in the prevention and therapy agenda.  
(See table bottom right)

**Building a well-being resource**

Physical activity on a regular basis enables one to:

- Have more energy, dynamism and vitality
- Enhance stamina/ workability
- Develop resilience
- Widen one’s horizons to undertake challenging activities and achieve one’s best – enrich one’s life.

Physical activity can enrich people’s lives through boundless opportunities to:

- Try things you always wanted to do, but couldn’t
- Learn new skills and experience challenging tasks
- Experience new opportunities to extend one’s horizons of what one is capable of doing and build competence and new confidence.
- Extend one’s social contacts and build new social networks
- Feel good about one’s achievements

conditions can exercise safely and this will help in the management of medical conditions amenable to exercise and experience the healthy benefits.

These points are important, because a more positive and personal message may present physical activity in a different light since the activity levels of older adults are exceptionally low. Instead of highlighting just the role that regular physical activity can play in reducing the risks of particular medical conditions, we need to focus on the central role that physical activity can play in living life to the full, whatever your age.

In all local authority active recreation facilities, the 50-65 year old is an often neglected age range. Yet they represent a major target group. They have more disposable income and spend more on leisure than the under-30s; they represent 40 per cent of consumer spending (Family Expenditure

Survey 1999-2000). However, their leisure interests centre on volunteering, travel, lifelong learning and passive entertainment (Age Concern 2004). The 50+ target group needs to be taken seriously and we need to make regular physical activity a more purposeful and attractive leisure option.

However, besides exploring marketing techniques, there is a real need to understand how older adults respond to regular exercise and what the appropriate guidelines are to follow. There has been very little advice in this area and it is no wonder that many people are seeking more concrete advice.

The evaluation of the nine LEAP projects indicates that very few people actually understand or know what the public health physical activity guidelines recommend. In fact, only five per cent of older adults know the recommendation that adults should achieve a total of at least 30 minutes a day of at least moderate-intensity physical activity on five or more days of the week. The message is very clear – most people seem to believe that exercise/physical activity is important, but we appear to have failed to get across how much is needed and what kind of activities are appropriate. We need to revisit the public health recommendations.



**People over the age of 50 represent the most sedentary segment of the adult population.**

# activity

**Reserve**

Physical activity on a regular basis enables one to build a reserve to recover more quickly from major illness, stress or hospital treatment. In the same way, it is important to recognise that regular purposeful physical activity has a key role to play in helping people to restore functional capacity and the ability to get back to normal life following long-term medical problems or illness. This role is important for people to recognise that following long-term sickness, our functional ability is considerably reduced and that appropriate exercise can be the key to recovery. There is ample evidence and good science to demonstrate the potential of training to reverse the loss of function (it is reversible) even among 90 year olds.

If we can persuade people that regular purposeful physical activity is important for their well-being, the health benefits of this will naturally accrue. This will enable us to tackle the prevention agenda at the same time with no extra resources or cost.

In terms of older adults, the prevention agenda will cover the following:

- Reduction of risk for specific medical conditions
- Delay functional decline
- Prevention of isolation
- Prevention of complications of immobility

In addition, we can help the general public to understand that even people with medical

**Current recommendations**

If one looks at the current international recommendations, there is a clear consistency.

- Everyone should try to do at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most days of the week – Australian Government Physical Activity Guidelines.
- Put together at least 30 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity on most preferably all days – Canada physical activity guidelines
- All adults should accumulate a minimum of 30 minutes of at least moderate-intensity physical activity on most, if not all days of the week – USA
- For general health benefit, adults should achieve a total of at least 30 minutes a day of at least

TABLE 1: PROMOTING WELL-BEING	
FLOURISHING	PREVENTION AGENDA
<p><b>Well-being Resource</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Have more energy, dynamism and vitality</li> <li>● Enhance stamina</li> <li>● Develop resilience</li> <li>● Psychological well-being</li> </ul>	<p><b>Risk reduction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Delay functional decline</li> <li>● Reduce Isolation</li> <li>● Reduce complications of immobility</li> </ul>
<p><b>Enriching lives</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Explore activities to enhance quality of life</li> <li>● Learn new skills</li> <li>● Extend one’s horizons</li> <li>● Extend social contacts and social networks</li> <li>● Enhancing mood and self-worth</li> </ul>	<p><b>Therapy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Management of medical conditions especially mental health</li> </ul>
<p><b>Well-being</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Reserve to recover more quickly from major illness, stress and hospital treatment</li> </ul>	<p><b>Restore Capacity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Restore functional ability</li> <li>● Restore will to get out and do things</li> </ul>

moderate-intensity physical activity on five or more days of the week. (England)

Older adults should take particular care to keep moving and retain their mobility through daily activity. Additionally, specific activities that promote improved strength, coordination and balance are particularly beneficial for older people. (Chief Medical Officer's Report 2005)

However, it is unclear whether these messages are aimed at the general public or health professionals. Also, should one exercise on preferably most days, five days per week or will three days suffice? What does moderate intensity mean? Will most people understand what accumulate means? What sort of physical activities are appropriate? These questions merely serve to expose some of the difficulties that need to be overcome if we are to communicate more adequately how much exercise or physical activity is important, to build up a physical activity resource to restore their capacity, enable them to feel better and have more energy and vitality so that they can enrich their lives and acquire a well-being reserve.

It is quite clear from the research evidence (CMO, 2005) that there is a need to highlight the value of improving one's strength, especially when muscle mass and strength are so easily lost after the age of 35-40, particularly in the sedentary individual. The older adult (50+) needs to understand the need to do something to restore their reduced capacity which can substantially inhibit their daily lives and reduces their potential to get the most out of their lives and improve its quality.

The World Health Organisation (2002) makes the following suggestion:

'The following regimen allows the individual to maintain bone and muscle strength. In order to continue to strengthen muscle and bone, one should steadily increase the intensity (weight) of the workout. Recommendations are:

- Strength training two to three days a week, with a day of rest between workouts.
- In a fitness centre, one set of 8-12 repetitions on 12 or more machines.
- At home, two to three sets of 8-12 repetitions using six-eight different exercises.



● When repetitions can be made in good form with ease, weight lifted should be increased. This recommendation is only possible if one has access to appropriate facilities within a local authority and where informed advice can be provided.'

### Physical activity recommendations

The role of basic physical activity recommendations needs to be re-considered, because we need to take into account the audience, the relevance of the message and the language. The above messages may well be appropriate for health professionals as a basic health message, but they need more detail. Lay people, especially older adults, may not understand moderate intensity. As we learn from recent research we understand that specific recommendations need to be tailored to specific conditions. This is particularly true for older adults, where you will have:

- Adults with no medical conditions
- Adults with chronic medical conditions
- Obese adults
- Frail adults

### What sort of guidance should we provide?

#### Older adults without chronic conditions

Older people (50+) require clear messages about how much physical activity is beneficial for well-

## Older adults should take particular care to keep moving and retain their mobility through daily activity

being and their health, but they also need reassurance that they are unlikely to over-exert themselves. For many older people, the concepts of physical activity and exercise are problematic because of negative experiences and little exposure to the wealth of opportunities now available.

Advice for someone who hasn't exercised for a number of years:

- Try and be active for at least 30 minutes of every day.
- Walking every day is the easiest way to achieve this.
- You can put together 30 minutes in bouts of 10 or 15 minutes.

● Start slowly and gradually increase the time that you spend walking each session.

● Once you can walk for 30 minutes without any discomfort you may wish to increase the time that you walk: 30 minutes is the minimum recommendation but the more you walk, the more your health will benefit.

● Some people may wish to increase their walking pace within the time spent walking. This is fine, but make sure that you do not experience any discomfort. Your chosen activity should make you breathe more deeply and more frequently, but without any discomfort. If you can walk and talk at the same time you are obviously doing very well and achieving the correct level of activity for you.

● Avoid extended periods of sitting.

Adults who are exercising regularly without any problems should simply follow the guidelines for any adult. However, they need to be aware that they will recover far more slowly from more intensive work than younger adults and may need to reduce their exercise load for 36 hours. In addition, it is always advisable not to exercise with a sore throat, raised temperature or any sort of viral illness. Rest and recovery is just as important as regular exercise. The safety precautions in any gymnasium or leisure facility should be followed to the letter.

Older adults can benefit enormously from exercising in leisure facilities, because of the variety of activities, and the opportunity both to do strength work and to have access to staff who are well informed and up-to-date.

#### Older adults with chronic conditions

Regular physical activity can be important for people with particular medical conditions and, if they are in a stable condition, there is everything to be gained from starting an exercise programme. However, it is important that guidelines prepared by different medical organisations (BHF, BACR, Asthma UK, Cancer Research UK etc) are followed carefully.

#### Obese older adults

There are two important points here. Overweight or obese older adults can gain health benefits from 30 minutes of regular physical activity each day, but they will not lose weight. If they wish to lose weight as well, it is necessary to walk for a longer period. Overweight/obese older adults will then need to consider how they can increase their 30 minutes to 60 minutes of physical activity a day. A suggestion is to segment the day into three parts and undertake 20 minutes of physical activity in each segment. 60 minutes is only four per cent of a day and most people spend at least 19 per cent of their day in front

of a screen, so this amount of physical activity is within most people's capabilities.

### Health and physical activity professionals

In this context we need to consider that basic physical activity messages need to be supplemented by providing more comprehensive guidance for health professionals as well as clear unambiguous messages to lay adults. One example is presented below but is this good enough?

- All adults need to be active for at least 30 minutes every day.
- You can put together 30 minutes in bouts of 10 or 15 minutes.
- Your chosen activity should make you breathe more deeply and more frequently but without any discomfort.
- Extended periods of sitting should be discouraged.

Balance, agility, mobility, coordination, and reaction time exercises should be performed by persons experiencing a diminished capacity in these areas of function.

Physical activity level should be increased more gradually in older adults to reduce the risk for soreness, discomfort, and injury. Older adults who have been sedentary should start with physical activity sessions of short duration and light intensity.

Older adults with existing medical conditions or those who are unsure about their safety during physical activity should first consult their doctor before engaging in regular physical activity.

We believe that greater attention needs to be directed at how messages and guidance are framed and made accessible. All organisations promoting physical activity need to be involved in this process, but there is some urgency. The authors of this article would welcome support from all interested organisations in driving this message home and as a result providing better support for physical activity professionals.

### Key promotional messages for older people

For many people simple messages need to be communicated as often as possible. The following strap lines represent examples of messages that we need to promote when we talk with older adults or display on walls.

- Get active your way – age is no barrier
- Every form of exercise or physical activity is an opportunity for improving health.
- Try to be active every day in as many ways as you can.
- Think of 'being active' every day as an opportunity, not an inconvenience.
- The more you move, the better you will feel.
- A little is good, more is better if you want to achieve health benefits.



- Put energy back into your life
- There are 1,440 minutes in the day. Find 30 of them to do a little activity!
- 30 minutes of walking is only two per cent of your day.
- Build physical activity into your daily life, that's active living!
- Think of minutes spent walking each day as £s in your health bank – start investing today.

In addition to providing clear comprehensive guidance on how much physical activity is needed to promote people's well-being and enhance their health, it is essential that any document provides comprehensive guidance on what good practice tells us. We need to capture the learning of successful attempts to promote regular physical activity. Two of the sections in the new guidance document will provide more detail on interventions that work together with programme planning.

### Guidance on translating evidence into practice

The guidelines draw upon recent published reviews of effectiveness, together with other published articles and guidelines in addition to learning from current professional experiences e.g. the Local Exercise Action Pilot programmes and other evaluated programmes.

In summarising the learning from these sources of evidence, the guidance highlights components of good practice that can be used for planning interventions at three levels:

- Population wide interventions, e.g. environmental and policy interventions, campaigning and promotion
- Community/locality based interventions, e.g. facility-based programmes, area-based physical activity projects and activity/participation events
- one-to-one interventions, e.g. lifestyle counselling and advice

**For older adults, strength, endurance, bone density and flexibility are all 'lost' at a rate of about 10 per cent per decade after the age of 40**

### Guidelines on programming

In addition, these guidelines offer an outline of best practice in physical activity and exercise programme planning, for those leading and instructing groups involved in a range of activities, such as walking, tai chi, music and movement classes and chair-based exercise

### Conclusion

In this article we have provided a brief sketch of the some of the main sections in a new document that will provide comprehensive guidance on working with older adults. This article has focused solely on adults of 50-65 years, because this represents an underserved target group where we can demonstrate that we have increased participation levels substantially; once the 50+ adult has taken to regular exercise they tend to make a commitment and remain faithful to the providers. Nevertheless, the advice and service that they receive is crucial, because they are very discerning. In this light, it is crucial for all local authorities to look carefully at their staff to ensure that they are well informed and display intelligent practice. In this case you will have a captive audience, but good training is essential.

Even though, we have focused on the 50-65 age range in this instance, we believe that local authorities have a major role to play in developing services for other older adults beyond the 65 age range. There are new roles that could emerge if active recreation teams could explore their work with older adults – there is a great potential here. County Sport Partnerships and Local Physical Activity Alliances need to recognise their crucial role in raising participation levels among older adults. In addition, other partnerships need to be recognised, such as social services, accident prevention, housing and care services. All these services can play a major role in promoting well-being and enabling older adults to flourish. The potential of this role needs to be explored, because it could be significant.

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