

Promoting Physical Activity for Canadian Older Adults (65y+) — A Resource for Practitioners —

Research strongly supports that staying active throughout our life is the best medicine for aging well. Brief motivational counselling, where healthcare providers provide information and exercise counselling and encourage older adults to engage in regular physical activity, increases participation.

Is it safe for older adults to engage in physical activity and exercise?



While older adults do differ from younger populations with respect to the prevalence of asymptomatic coronary artery disease and the coexistence of chronic conditions and physical limitations, the older adult population can safely engage in physical activity and exercise. It is never too late to become more active; with age, we still maintain the same ability to get fitter and stronger and gain health benefits from physical activity and exercise.

Health benefits of physical activity and exercise for older adults

- ✓ Counters age-related physiological changes, like decreased muscle mass and aerobic fitness.
- ✓ Maintains fitness, functional independence, mobility, balance and reduces disability risk.
- ✓ Reduces risk of age-related chronic conditions and helps manage chronic conditions.
- ✓ Reduces risk of cognitive impairment and maintains mental health.

What kind and how much physical activity and exercise do older adults need?

The Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology has developed evidence-based *Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Adults 65+* that reflect the different types and amount of physical activity needed to have a meaningful impact on health and function.

Following the Guidelines translates to a 30% reduction in the risk of losing independence, premature death, and morbidity, with greater physical activity levels resulting in a 60% reduction in risk!



Physical activity and exercise clearance

Anyone who exercises incurs some risk for an adverse event. However, specifically for older adults:

- There is an increased risk for myocardial infarction and sudden cardiac death with acute vigorous exercise bouts (1.6% at age 79y, 4.8% at age 90y); however, habitual physical activity attenuates the risk greatly (5-50 fold).
- 89% of older Canadians have at least one chronic condition and after age 80 years it is not uncommon to have 3-4 chronic conditions (with accompanying medication use).

As such, primary care physicians have a key role to play in medical clearance and risk stratification. Pre-exercise screening can identify age-related and health issues and thus provide modifications to facilitate safe exercise.

Traditionally it was standard for anyone over the age of 65 years to undergo medical screening (e.g. stress test) prior to starting an exercise program.

However, most older adults can safely take up light to moderate activity without medical clearance and without undue risk.

Current exercise preparticipation health screening procedures can be used for any age to determine if further medical clearance is required.

These procedures focus on:

- current physical activity levels
- history and symptoms of cardiovascular, metabolic or renal disease
- the desired exercise intensity for the person who wants to initiate an exercise program.

Refer to the *Pre-Activity Screening for Older Adults* Resource.

Pre-Activity Screening	
Screening Level	Selection Criteria
Self-screening	<p>Criteria. Most people can safely take up light to moderate activity without medical clearance and without undue risk.</p> <p>Action. An easy to self-administer evidence-informed tool is the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP) Get Active Questionnaire (GAQ). The GAQ was designed to identify individuals who should see an appropriate exercise professional or health care provider before becoming more physically active.</p>
Screening and/or Advice with a Professional	<p>Criteria. Individuals who have any significant health concerns, or answered 'yes' to questions from the GAQ, may require guidance from the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *QEP Qualified Exercise Professional – Has post-secondary education in exercise sciences and advanced certification in area of chronic conditions. **HCP Health care provider – A physician, nurse practitioner, or allied health professional. <p>Action.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individuals seek advice from a QEP or health care provider • An individual is referred to a QEP by their health care provider <p>Criteria. Screening guidelines for determining if medical clearance from a health care provider is recommended are based on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current physical activity level • History and symptoms of cardiovascular, metabolic, respiratory or renal disease • Individual plans to engage in high-intensity physical activity or plans to drastically increase the amount of physical activity they engage in. <p>Process. Medical clearance typically includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health history • Physical examination • Exercise stress testing • More extensive diagnostic testing
Medical Clearance	

Safety Considerations

Exercise injuries can occur at any age and generally older adults are not at an increased risk for musculoskeletal injuries with proper technique and tailored exercise prescription. However, there are some other unique safety considerations for older adults:

- ✓ Older adults are more susceptible to dehydration and have a lower perception of thirst. Water intake should be regularly encouraged before, during and after exercise.
- ✓ In hot temperatures and humid conditions, older adults are at a greater risk of heat-related illnesses such as heat stroke. Older adults should refrain from strenuous activity on hot, humid days.
- ✓ Older adults are more susceptible to cold injuries because of their decreased ability to perceive ambient air temperatures adequately and due to some medications.
- ✓ Because of changes in balance (e.g. in the vestibular system) and baroreflex response (e.g. postural hypotension) activities which require quick changes in head position should be avoided to reduce risk of falls and injury.



Physical Activity Counselling

Fewer than 1 in 4 older adults meet the *Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Adults ages 65+*. Understand and communicate the health and functional benefits of all the different types of physical activity and exercise for older adults.

- ✓ Share the ***Physical Activity for Older Adults*** resource with your older patients.
- ✓ 'Older adults' represent a large age-range and large range of abilities and health conditions.
- ✓ Motivation to begin activity are different and exercise prescriptions should be specific to each individual.
- ✓ Medical screening procedures that may include a physical exam, functional testing or possibly a stress test can provide reassurance of physical fitness status and may act as a confidence building experience to previously inactive older adults.
- ✓ Ask patients if they get chest pain at rest or with exertion, experience unexplained shortness of breath or lightheadedness.
- ✓ Connect with ***Qualified Exercise Professionals*** whose scope of practice includes older adults.

Links to Resources:

Exercise is Medicine® Canada: <https://www.exerciseismedicine.org/canada/>

Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Adults ages 65 years and older: www.csepguidelines.ca

CSEP's *Get Active Questionnaire*: <https://www.csep.ca/get-active-questionnaire>