



Active Living Tips for Older Adults

Practical, leading edge research results applied to physical activity for older adults, in plain language for health practitioners and leaders.
 Sponsored by the Active Living Coalition for Older Adults (ALCOA).

Physical Activity and Mental Health

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Older adults often hear that a physically active lifestyle can help your physical health. Regular physical activity prevents

and helps to manage osteoporosis, heart disease, falls, and diabetes. *But does physical activity have positive effects on your mental health?* The answer – a definite YES!

The aspects of mental health where we are quite sure physical activity has positive effects fall into four broad areas. These are depression, anxiety, cognitive function and self-confidence about physical performance. Mental health benefits of physical activity can be obtained in at least one of these four areas by most older adults. Let's look at these one at a time.

Prolonged **depression or anxiety** can limit an older adult's life. Depression symptoms include difficulty in concentrating, memory loss, disturbed sleep, changes in appetite, fatigue, and feelings of worthlessness. Anxiety symptoms include a racing heart, tense muscles, feelings of stress and uncertainty. For most older adults, these feelings are not long lasting (e.g., as in

months, years) and may be experienced for as little as a single day or as much as a few weeks. The longer they last, the more they can detract from quality of life.



Physical activity has been found to be one of the factors related to a lower incidence of non-chronic depression and anxiety in the lives of older adults.

How much physical activity helps?

When older adults are involved in regular physical activity, which is 30 minutes of moderate activity most days of the week, it's more likely that the symptoms of non-chronic depression and anxiety will decrease. Walking indoors in the hallways of a

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residence, a mall, community centre or in the neighbourhood are examples of moderate activity. Swimming and cycling are similar examples that add variety. It's more likely older adults will experience mental health benefits when they stick with regular, moderate activity of 30 minutes daily, most days of the week for several months.

For those older adults who are inactive or struggling most with negative symptoms, the news is good. The positive gains for those people appear to be the largest. However, older adults without depression and anxiety can gain in the other areas of cognitive function and self-confidence.

The effect of physical activity on **cognitive functioning** is important because of the known decline in central nervous system function with aging. If you participate in regular, moderate level physical activity (e.g., walking) of 35-45 minutes in duration, cognitive functions improve. Examples are mental tasks needing speed, remembering, and responding to certain cues while ignoring others.

A sense of personal control is very essential to older adults' psychological and physical health. A decline in both of these parts of health can be troubling. **Self-confidence** about abilities to climb stairs, walk a city block, and even plan for 30 minutes of daily physical activity can be low because of health declines. The good news is that the kind of regular physical activity we have been discussing boosts older adults' confidence for related physical tasks like walking in a mall, grocery store, climbing stairs, getting out in the community. *Try it and gain confidence now!!*



Remember: Consult your doctor for advice that is specific to your health condition.

*The content of this Active Living Tips sheet is based on the text of the ALCOA Research Update 2006 article titled **Physical Activity and Mental Health** written by L.R. Brawley, PhD.; M.E. Jung, MSc.; and K.E. Glazebrook, B.A.Hons. This text has been reviewed by the ALCOA Research Committee.*

An excellent source of information about the kinds of physical activity that are good for you is Canada's Physical Activity Guide for Older Adults. This Guide is available on the internet at www.paguide.com and can be ordered by calling 1-888-334-9769.

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