Moving More: The Importance of Physical Activity

Regular physical activity is important for your health. Staying active has benefits for people of all ages and abilities! This handout explains why regular physical activity is so important for overall health, especially for people with Down syndrome. This handout also provides suggestions for staying active.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY?

Physical activity has benefits for everyone of any age or ability. Benefits of physical activity include:

- Supports healthy weight
- Lower risk of joint pain and other health conditions (including diabetes, high blood pressure, abnormal cholesterol levels, obesity, and liver disease)
- Helps build self-esteem and social or teamwork skills
- Helps keep the brain healthy. In people with Down syndrome, physical activity helps lower the risk of developing Alzheimer’s disease (a disease that affects a person’s memory, thinking and behavior)
- Improve a person’s performance in school
- Promotes independence for daily living through practice of strength and coordination
- In a group setting, physical activity can create connections and build friendships

WHY IS PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT FOR THOSE WITH DOWN SYNDROME?

Individuals with Down syndrome burn fewer calories at rest. It is common for people with Down syndrome to need slightly smaller portions of food and slightly more physical activity than people without Down syndrome.

Most people with Down syndrome do not get the recommended amount of physical activity for their age.

HOW MUCH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY DO PEOPLE NEED FOR THEIR AGE?

Most people with and without Down syndrome do not get enough physical activity every day. In 2020, the United States Department of Health and Human Services, recommended the following amounts of physical activity for children, teens, and adults:

Children, teens, and young adults (6-17 years)
- 1 hour (60 minutes) of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily, including at least 3 days a week or more of physical activity to strengthen muscles and bones

Adults (18 years and older)
- At least 2-5 hours (150-300 minutes) of moderate to vigorous physical activity throughout the week, including physical activity to strengthen muscles and bones

WHO ARE ROLE MODELS AND MENTORS FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY?

For people with Down syndrome, having positive role models and mentors for physical activity can be very encouraging. If parents or guardians lead active lifestyles, their children are more likely to also lead active lifestyles through adulthood. Role models can be parents, teachers, peers, or other people who are important to you. For example, this could be a sibling, cousin, niece, nephew, friend, or a respected community member.

Looking for another role model? Chris Nikic is an Ironman athlete who became the first ever person with Down syndrome to complete a race! He says by doing “1% better every day,” he learned that no one could stop him from achieving his goals.
WHAT ARE EASY TIPS TO LEAD A MORE ACTIVE LIFESTYLE?

Leading a more active lifestyle starts with small steps that, over time, turn into healthy habits you practice every day. Here are some ways to add more movement to your day:

- Invite a friend to go for a walk
- Dance as a family or with a friend before dinner
- If it is safe to do so and you are familiar with the area, take public transportation and get off one stop early and walk to your destination
- Take the stairs instead of the elevator
- If you are sitting for a long time, stand up and do leg stretches. You can also stretch while watching TV or sitting at a desk.
- Dance during commercial breaks
- If it is safe to do so, walk an extra loop around the block or neighborhood

HOW DO YOU KNOW WHETHER PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IS MODERATE OR VIGOROUS?

You can tell whether physical activity is moderate or vigorous depending on the following:

**Moderate activity**
- Faster heartbeat
- Harder breathing
- Can still talk during the activity

**Vigorous activity**
- Even more effort than moderate activity
- Cannot talk without getting out of breath
- People with Down syndrome will probably get warm and may or may not sweat

Is dancing a type of physical activity?

Yes, dancing is a great type of physical activity! Depending on the type of dance, it could be considered moderate for one person or intense for another.

How can I get involved in Special Olympics?

**Young Athletes**

Special Olympics Young Athletes is an early childhood program for children ages 2-7 with and without intellectual disabilities. Children learn how to play with others and develop important skills for social and emotional learning. They also learn motor skills, acceptance and expectations.

www.specialolympics.org/our-work/inclusive-health/young-athletes

**Unified Sports**

Special Olympics Unified Sports joins people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team and is dedicated to promoting social inclusion through shared sports and training experiences.

www.specialolympics.org/our-work/sports/unified-sports

Did you know…?

The YMCA offers inclusion specialists who can help develop an individualized plan for physical activity. For example, an inclusion specialist can help you decide between a group swim class and individual swim lessons. They can also help introduce you, your loved one and their workout partner to a gym space or group fitness class.

Don’t forget nutrition!

Both physical activity and eating a healthy diet are important in maintaining a healthy lifestyle and preventing disease. Consult your registered dietitian-nutritionist or see nutritional resources on our MGH Down Syndrome website at www.massgeneral.org/children/down-syndrome/patient-resources

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