



Health inequalities: Physical activity

Introduction

Low physical activity is amongst the top 10 causes of disease and disability in England¹. Participation in regular physical activity reduces the risk of coronary heart disease and stroke, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, 8 cancers, and depression. It is also important for energy balance to maintain a healthy body weight, cognitive functioning, sleep, cardiovascular fitness and maintaining joint, bone and muscle strength for good physical function and prevention of frailty².

Prevalence and risk factors

A systematic review of physical activity levels in adults with learning disabilities found that they are 'incredibly inactive' with only 9% of participants across 15 studies from a number of countries achieving minimum physical activity guidelines³. One large scale survey of adults with learning disabilities in England found that 59% of participants had not participated in sport at all in the last month and of these, over a third said that they would like to⁴. For adolescents and young adults with mild/moderate learning disabilities in England, rates of participation in sports/exercise were consistently lower than for their peers without learning disabilities⁵. More severe learning disability has been found to be the strongest predictor of not meeting physical activity guidelines³. People living in more restrictive environments are also at increased risk of inactivity⁶.

Impact on people with learning disabilities

Lack of physical activity excludes people with learning disabilities from the mental and physical health benefits of physical activity. In addition, lack of physical activity in people with learning disabilities has been linked to cardiac atrophy⁷ and is likely to be linked to high reported obesity rates in children and adults with learning disabilities^{8 9 10 11}. People with learning disabilities may also be excluded from the benefits of sport, which has a role in promoting psychological well-being and increasing social capital¹².

Healthcare and treatment

It is important that this crucial part of a healthy lifestyle is promoted in people with learning disabilities. Suggested strategies for increasing physical activity in people with learning disabilities include reward systems, a 'buddy' system, and recording progress on wall charts¹³. However, the research evidence base for how to improve participation in physical activity among people with learning disabilities is under-developed^{14 15} and interventions have been found to be ineffective¹⁵ or the evidence inconsistent¹⁶.

A recent trial of a walking programme to increase physical activity in adults with learning disabilities (mainly with mild to moderate learning disabilities) found no change in walking or other secondary outcomes¹⁷. The authors note that increasing physical activity may require more intensive programmes or upstream approaches to address the multiple social disadvantages experienced by people with learning disabilities¹⁷. Population-specific theoretical and evidence-based interventions need to be developed¹⁵.

Social determinants

In the general population of England, physical inactivity is higher in more deprived local areas and has large education and income gradients¹⁸. There is little evidence relating to social determinants of physical inactivity specifically for people with learning disabilities. One large scale survey of adults with learning disabilities in England found that participants who were poor, living in more deprived neighbourhoods and who felt unsafe in the area where they live were less likely to take part in sport⁴. The quality of social care support received is likely to impact on the physical activity of people with learning disabilities. In a study about carer intentions, only 56.4% of Scottish care staff planned to encourage physical activity in those they support¹⁹.

Resources

Mencap [Let's Get Active](#) An easy read guide to physical activity and sport for people with learning disabilities with information and advice on how people with learning disabilities can get involved in sports.

[Mencap Sport](#)

References

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