

Exploring the Physical Activity of Adults Aging with Long-Term Physical Disabilities: A Qualitative Study

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INTRODUCTION

- Adults aging with long-term physical disabilities (AAwPD) experience restricted participation in a variety of meaningful day life activities
- Physical activity = meaningful activity for many and important for physical and mental health
- Limited evidence exploring perspectives of AAwPD related to physical activity

METHODS

- N=20 AAwPD ages 45-65 living in mid-sized midwestern city
- Virtual semi-structured interviews following iteratively developed interview guide
- Standard qualitative analysis using NVivo and open coding methods

RESULTS

Table 1. Participant demographics (N=20)

Characteristic	Total Sample
Age in years,* Mean (SD)	58 (5.1)
Years with disability,* Mean (SD)	21 (14.7)
Female, n (%)	14 (66.7)
Black/African American, n (%)	9 (42.9)
Primary cause of disability	
Neurological	10 (47.6)
Musculoskeletal	6 (28.6)
Other	4 (19.0)
On temporary or permanent disability leave, n (%)	12 (57.1)
Living alone, n (%)	9 (42.9)
Socioeconomic status (SES) below national average,* n (%)	18 (90)

*continuous variable; all others dichotomous

Despite interest and motivation, adults aging with long-term physical disabilities face personal and environmental barriers to engaging in physical activity that meets current guidelines.



Barriers & Facilitators

“By the time you use [the paratransit service], you just sit and wait, and by the time you get ready to use the equipment, you exhausted. Knowing that you got to be back in that van for another 1-2 hours—it's very exhausting”
- 59 years old, neurological disability since birth

“[When I exercise], my self-esteem goes up, I smile more, I'm in a better mood. I feel prettier, sexier as a woman, my clothes look better.”
- 61 years old, musculoskeletal disability, 12 years with disability



Self-Reported Benefits



Motivations & Beliefs

“My doctors tell me to watch how much I weigh because the more fat you have to carry around, it will be harder for you to move. And my mobility is important to me.”
- 58 years old, neurological disability, 58 years with disability

“At least 5 times a week... if I come home exhausted, I may not do the formal exercise. But I get it in whenever I can.”
- 64 years old, neurological disability, 20 years with disability



Routines & Habits



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QUALITATIVE THEMES

Theme	Summarized Findings
Barriers and facilitators	Categorized into personal (e.g., pain, fatigue, depression) and environmental (e.g., facility accessibility, transportation, COVID-19 pandemic) factors. Participants primarily described factors as barriers.
Self-reported benefits	All participants identified at least one benefit of physical activity, including improved energy, self-esteem, mood, strength, endurance, and mobility.
Motivations and beliefs	18/20 participants expressed a desire to engage in more physical activity. Common motivators included identifying as an active person, maintaining weight for transfers and mobility, and improving appearance.
Routines and habits	13/20 participants reported having a formal or informal physical activity routine (range of 3-11 hrs activity/week). Activities were described as low-impact and low-intensity.

DISCUSSION

- Physical activity is a highly valued occupation
- Most AAwPD are not meeting current physical activity guidelines for persons with disabilities
- Multitude of personal and environmental factors perceived by AAwPD as barriers
- Sample provides insight into AAwPD's experiences related to physical activity in low-resourced contexts (i.e., 90% of participants below national SES average)

LIMITATIONS

- Findings may not generalize to other geographic regions due to infrastructure, climate, etc.

CONCLUSION

- Findings may inform researchers, community organizations, and clinicians in intervention development and implementation to promote physical activity for AAwPD

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