

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Perspectives of Adults Aging with Physical Disabilities

Understanding the perspectives, experiences and motivations adults aging with long-term physical disabilities have regarding physical activity (PA) could help community organizations promote and support their PA participation.

We held one-on-one interviews with 20 adults aging with physical disability.

We asked participants about

- Factors that affect their PA
- How they participate in PA (types, frequency, routines)
- Their motivations and beliefs about PA

Data analysis revealed four broad themes

1. Barriers and Facilitators

Major barriers were:

- **Accessibility**, including accessibility of fitness centers/gyms, participants' homes, and/or their neighborhoods and communities
- **Symptoms and secondary conditions** like pain, fatigue, stiffness and soreness

Other barriers were the COVID-19 pandemic, location/proximity to fitness facilities, mental health, transportation and weather.

Things that facilitated PA for participants were:

- Having family or friends to work out with
- Inclusive and accessible facilities
- In-person (vs. virtual) exercise classes
- Personal assistance



2. Routines and Habits

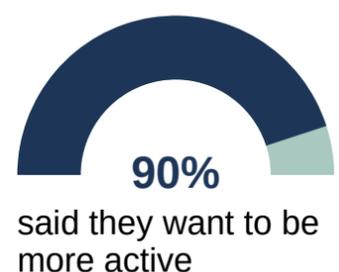
Participants engaged in various activities, from formal PA, like **swimming, cycling, stretching, walking** and **working out at accessible gyms**, to informal PA, like **gardening, housework** and **grocery shopping**.



Activity levels varied among participants, but the vast majority said they wanted to be more physically active.

Symptoms like pain and fatigue often influenced participants' PA levels.

Some participants reported that they used to have a PA routine, but it was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.



3. Motivations and Beliefs

Motivations for PA included:

- **Self-identity**—some participants described being active as an important aspect of who they are
- **Mental health**
- **Weight loss**—for both self-esteem and health reasons
- **More energy** to participate in family activities
- **Social interactions**



4. Benefits of PA

Participants described both personal and physical benefits of PA.

Personal

- Increased energy
- Social interactions
- Self-esteem
- Mental health/mood
- Weight control



Physical

- Better:
 - Balance
 - Cardiovascular health
 - Strength
 - Circulation
- Pain relief
- Maintaining mobility

Implications

- Personal and environmental barriers need to be addressed to promote PA for adults aging with physical disabilities.
 - Health-care providers should assess whether symptoms and conditions can be managed with medication, self-management strategies, or other methods.
- Physical accessibility and the social environment were also common themes.
 - Participants preferred to exercise at accessible and inclusive gyms, which strengthens the evidence supporting adaptive fitness centers and/or inclusive gyms.

The results of this study help us understand more about the PA experiences, preferences and habits of adults aging with long-term physical disabilities and may provide information useful for designing interventions and community programs.

Citation: Heeb Desai, R., Kiserow, R., Mulings, A., Smith, M., Tucker, S., Eyler, A., Stark, S., Morgan, K. Exploring perspectives of adults aging with long-term physical disabilities on physical activity: A qualitative study. *American Journal of Health Promotion*. doi: 10.1177/08901171221151123