PHYSICAL ACTIVITY GUIDELINES
for Adults with Spinal Cord Injury

PREAMBLE

These guidelines are appropriate for all healthy adults with chronic spinal cord injury, traumatic or non-traumatic, including tetraplegia and paraplegia, irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity or socio-economic status. Adults are encouraged to participate in a variety of physical activities that are enjoyable and safe.

Adults can meet these guidelines through sports, transportation, recreation, occupational demands or planned exercise, in the context of family, work, volunteer, and community activities. The guidelines should be achieved above and beyond the incidental physical activity accumulated in the course of structured rehabilitation or daily living.

Following these physical activity guidelines can lead to improved cardiovascular and muscular fitness. The potential benefits far exceed the potential risks associated with physical activity. These guidelines may be appropriate for those with an acute spinal cord injury, who are pregnant, have an active infection, are susceptible to autonomic dysreflexia, or have a chronic medical condition beyond a spinal cord injury; however, they should consult with a health professional to understand the types and amounts of physical activity appropriate for them.

For those who are physically inactive, doing amounts below the recommended levels may bring some fitness benefits. For these adults, it is appropriate to start with smaller amounts of physical activity and gradually increase duration, frequency, and intensity as a progression towards meeting the guidelines.

For important fitness benefits, adults with a spinal cord injury should engage in:

At least 20 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity aerobic activity 2 times per week,
AND
Strength training exercises 2 times per week, consisting of 3 sets of 8-10 repetitions of each exercise for each major muscle group.

How...? Aerobic Activity Strength Training Activity

How often? Two times per week Two times per week

How much? Gradually increase your activity so that you are doing at least 20 minutes of aerobic activity during each workout session. Repetitions are the number of times you lift and lower a weight.

Gradually work up to doing 3 sets of 8-10 repetitions of each exercise. This counts as 1 set.

How hard? These activities should be performed at a moderate to vigorous intensity. Pick a resistance (free weights, cable pulleys, bands, etc.) heavy enough that you can barely, but safely, finish 8-10 repetitions of the last set.

Moderate intensity: activities that feel somewhat hard, but you can keep doing them for a while without getting tired.

Be sure to rest for 1-2 minutes between each set and exercise.

Vigorous intensity: activities that make you feel like you are working really hard, almost at your maximum, and you cannot do these activities for very long without getting tired.

How to? There are many ways to reach this goal, including:

Upper Body Exercises: wheeling, arm cycling, sports

Lower Body Exercises: body weight supported treadmill walking, cycling

Whole Body Exercise: recumbent stepper, water exercise

There are many ways to reach this goal, including:

Free weights

Elastic resistance bands

Cable pulleys

Weight machines

Functional electrical stimulation