



## BHF National Centre **physical activity+health**

### What are the common barriers to physical activity?

**Answer: Barriers to activity vary between population groups. For younger people, these barriers may include parental safety concerns and self-consciousness. For the elderly these barriers may be health related and for the disabled, barriers might include the built environment and lack of access to appropriate facilities.**

Reported barriers to physical activity vary between age, sex, socio-economic status and a range of other factors. It has been reported that being self-conscious about looks and feeling unmotivated during exercise emerged in research as important barriers to physical activity participation among adolescent girls.<sup>1</sup> Researchers suggest that these barriers should be taken into account when implementing physical activity interventions, for example, giving girls sufficient time after activity to shower. It may also be plausible to separate boys from girls during physical activity to reduce feelings of self-consciousness. A recent review reported similar barriers with regards to self-consciousness preventing participation. In this review, the evidence suggested that showing others an unfit body, lacking confidence and competence in core skills and appearing overly masculine were barriers to participation.<sup>2</sup>

Parental concerns about neighbourhood safety can be a barrier to childhood physical activity participation as their perception of the environment as unsafe can prevent outdoor activity.<sup>3</sup> Also relevant is that an analysis of the 2001 New South Wales Child Health Survey has shown that more than 25% of parents/ carers of active children aged 5-12 years reported discouraging or preventing children from playing a particular sport (34.7% for boys and 16.6% for girls) because of injury and safety concerns.<sup>4</sup> The BHF resource 'Couch Kids' cites a systematic review that identified 20 key barriers to children's participation in physical activity. These fall into four main areas; preferences and priorities, family life and parental support, restricted access to opportunities for participation and lack of enjoyment.<sup>5</sup>

Researchers have used focus groups to identify the barriers to sport and recreation for adults with disabilities and found that fitness and recreation professionals, architects, people with disabilities and city planners all cited the inaccessibility of the environment as a key barrier, although a total of 178 barriers were identified overall. These include:

- Facility front desk being too high for persons in wheelchairs to communicate

- Lack of elevators in facilities
- Difficulty accessing hot tubs, saunas and swimming pools
- Lack of curb cuts
- Psychological barriers such as feeling self conscious when visiting a facility
- Disabled consumers often being expected to pay the same membership fee as persons without disabilities, even though many of the features of the facility remain inaccessible
- Lack of knowledge about disabilities among fitness centre employees

The conclusion of the authors was that degree of participation in physical activity among people with disabilities is affected by a multifactorial set of barriers and facilitators unique to this population. This should be taken into consideration to develop intervention strategies with greater chance of success.<sup>6</sup>

It has been documented that older people may experience pain, fatigue, mobility, and sensory impairments as health barriers to physical activity.<sup>7</sup> For example, problems with hearing may be a barrier to walking in public places but walking with a companion or in a group may help to overcome this problem. It is suggested that if these barriers are ignored when developing interventions, the patients may perceive the providers as giving advice that is insensitive to their needs and difficulties.<sup>7</sup> A more recent review also identified poor health as the leading barrier to both physical activity and exercise among older adults, with lack of knowledge and understanding of the relationship between moderate exercise activity and health also featuring as a relevant barrier.<sup>8</sup> The authors of this review suggest that physical activity encouraged by physicians may be effective in helping older adults overcome their barriers, as contact increases in later life and it is established that this generation have respect and faith in their general practitioner.<sup>8</sup>

### References:

<sup>1</sup> Robbins, L.B., Pender, N.J. & Kazanis, A.S. (2003). Barriers to Physical Activity Perceived by Adolescent Girls. *Journal of Midwifery and Women's Health* 48: 206-212

<sup>2</sup> Allender, S., Cowburn, G. & Foster, C. (2006). Understanding participation in sport and physical activity among children and adults: a review of qualitative studies. *Health Education Research* 21 (6): 826-35

<sup>3</sup> Weir, L.A., Etelson, D. & Brand, D.A. (2006). Parents' perceptions of neighbourhood safety and children's physical activity. *Preventive Medicine* 43(3): 212-7.

<sup>4</sup> Boufous, S., Finch, C. & Bauman, A. Parental safety concerns- a barrier to sport and physical activity in children? *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 28 (5): 482-486.

<sup>5</sup> The British Heart Foundation. (2006). *Couch Kids: The Continuing Epidemic*. London: BHF.

<sup>6</sup> Rimmer, J.H., Riley, B., Wang, E., Rauworth, A. & Jurkowski, J. (2004). Physical Activity Participation Among Persons with Disabilities: Barriers and Facilitators. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 26 (5): 419-425.

<sup>7</sup> Cooper, K.M., Bilbrew, D., Dubbert, P.M., Kerr, K. & Kirchner, K. (2001). Health barriers to walking for exercise in elderly primary care. *Geriatric Nursing* 22 (5): 258-262.

<sup>8</sup> Schutzer, K.A., and Graves, B.S. 2004. Barriers and motivations to exercise in older adults. *Preventive Medicine* 39: 1056-106.

**The following resources are available from the BHF, free of charge and might be of interest:**

**Couch Kids (G243)**

**Get Active (G12)**

**To order single copies of these resources please contact Natalie Wiggins and Kirsty Snedden on 01509 223259. To order these resources in bulk, contact BHF dataforce on 0870 600 6566 and quote the order numbers provided above.**