



LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

Citation:

Wilcock, L and Williams, TL and Sparkes, A and Evans, AB (2023) "It's not just a means to an end" thinking about physical activity for people with spinal cord injury. *The Sport and Exercise Scientist* (77). p. 23. ISSN 1754-3444

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/10438/>

Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

First published in *The Sport and Exercise Scientist*, Autumn 2023, issue 77. Published by the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences - www.bases.org.uk

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

“It’s not just a means to an end” thinking about physical activity for people with spinal cord injury

Laura Wilcock, Dr Toni Williams, Dr. Adam Evans and Professor Andrew Sparkes share recommendations for advocating physical activity for people with spinal cord injury

Physical activity (PA) is vital for physical and psychological health and wellbeing. For individuals with spinal cord injury (SCI) engagement in PA can alleviate or reduce many of the associated health and well-being complications. For example, PA can reduce the risk of secondary health problems (Buchholz et al., 2009), improve fitness and cardio-vascular health (van der Scheer et al., 2017) and enhance well-being (Williams et al., 2014). However, despite this, disabled people are twice as likely to be inactive as non-disabled people (Sport England, 2018) and individuals with SCI have particularly high levels of inactivity. For these reasons it is important to consider how we communicate the need for, and benefits of, PA to the SCI population. therefore, the purpose of this article is to present recommendations for advocating PA for individuals with SCI.

Advice should be person-centred

Individual, tailored advice and support to engage in and enjoy PA is beneficial for people with SCI. Although the provision of general PA guidelines for disabled people is important and necessary, the vast range of physical impairments and health challenges that can result from SCI mean that every individual’s experience and needs are unique. The preferred source of information regarding PA for people with SCI is peers, social care workers, and health service providers (Smith & Wightman, 2021); this preference for personal communication provides an opportunity for a person-centred approach whereby general guidelines are translated and adapted to suit individual needs and experiences. For example, messages about being active enough to become ‘out of breath’ may be unhelpful for someone with a high-level SCI who may never be able to achieve this. However, even with a cervical spinal injury, other PA benefits like sensory pleasure may still be accessible from activities such as being in a swimming pool or in water. This type of activity could also provide wellbeing and social benefits despite not increasing an individual’s heart rate or increasing their rate of breathing.

But shift the focus away from personal *responsibility*

Guidance and advice aimed at individuals must also be balanced with recognition of the support that people with SCI require to engage in leisure time physical activity (LTPA). A neoliberal approach to health can place unrealistic expectations on disabled people with regard to making choices about being physically active and taking personal responsibility for their own health. For individuals living with SCI, relationships with others and care provision can influence both individuals’ desire and ability to be active. This is something that should be taken into consideration when recommending or providing opportunities for PA. For example, limited professional care provision might constrain a person’s opportunities to be active; but an

opportunity to engage in activity with friends or family members might be a more appealing prospect than an adapted activity for the individual to undertake alone.

Be aware that exercise is not always medicine

PA is often positioned as a panacea for treating, managing and preventing ill health. The exercise is medicine (EiM) narrative has become so powerful that it is often accepted without question. However, for people living with chronic health conditions, PA and exercise are not always beneficial, and can be a source of pain and discomfort. Therefore, a shift in focus away from just the physical benefits of PA is recommended for people with SCI. Healthcare professionals should consider tempering the focus on EiM, and focus more on pleasure, social benefits and the impact on general wellbeing of LTPA. The message that PA should not be treated solely as a means to an end, but as an end in itself is more appropriate for people with chronic health conditions.

Consider options beyond parasport

Ableist notions of the inferiority of disability sport compared to non-disabled sport can lead to a reluctance to engage in disability-specific or adapted PA and/or sport. A more widespread availability and acceptance of activities and sports accessible to both disabled and non-disabled individuals could provide more attractive opportunities for engagement in LTPA. A consideration of opportunities that would allow people to experience a 'level playing field' with disabled and non-disabled others might enable participation with family and friends that otherwise would not be possible from engaging in strictly disability sport.

Supporting people living with SCI to be more physically active is vital for their health and wellbeing. Individuals with SCI look to healthcare professionals for advice on PA and the recommendations presented here provide key considerations that can facilitate meaningful conversations about engagement and enjoyment of PA.

Buchholz, A. C., Martin Ginis, K. A., Bray, S. R., Craven, B. C., Hicks, A. L., Hayes, K. C., Latimer, A. E., McColl, M. A., Potter, P. J., & Wolfe, D. L. (2009). Greater daily leisure time physical activity is associated with lower chronic disease risk in adults with spinal cord injury. *Applied Physiology, Nutrition and Metabolism*, 34(4), 640–647.
<https://doi.org/10.1139/H09-050>

Smith, B., & Wightman, L. (2021). Promoting physical activity to disabled people: messengers, messages, guidelines and communication formats. *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 43(24), 3427-3431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2019.1679896>

Sport England, (2018). *Active lives adult survey: May 17/18 Report*.
<https://www.sportengland.org/media/13768/active-lives-adult-may-17-18-report.pdf>

van der Scheer, J. W., Martin Ginis, K. A., Ditor, D. S., Goosey-Tolfrey, V. L., Hicks, A. L., West, C. R., & Wolfe, D. L. (2017). Effects of exercise on fitness and health of adults with spinal cord injury: a systematic review. *Neurology*, 89(7), 736-745.
<https://doi.org/10.1212/WNL.0000000000004224>

Williams, T. L., Smith, B., & Papatomas, A. (2014). The barriers, benefits, and facilitators of leisure time physical activity among people with spinal cord injury: A meta-synthesis of

qualitative findings. *Health Psychology Review*, 8(4), 404–425.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2014.898406>