Dear Alice,

I am disabled and in a wheelchair, and need to lose a lot of weight. I know I have to watch what I eat, but what kind of exercise can I do also?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It’s great that you’re being proactive about your physical activity! The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that adults engage in 150 minutes of moderate intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity physical activity, in addition to at least two days of weight training each week. Although there may be some modifications needed, there are many ways to get the body moving. Individuals in wheelchairs or with other disabilities may face barriers with physical activity and exercise, but talking with professionals who have experience working with people with disabilities will hopefully help you overcome or address any challenges too ramping up activity and reach your goal.

Before beginning a physical activity regimen, it’s recommended that you talk with your medical provider to get the go-ahead for exercise. They’ll be able to check for any underlying health issues and any side effects that you may experience while starting a new physical activity routine if you’re taking any medications. Was the weight loss recommended by a health care professional for a particular reason? Is it a personal interest of yours? They can also inform ways in which weight loss may or may not be beneficial to your health and how to achieve your goals without detriment to your health. They may also be able to refer you to other professionals who could help you.

Physical activity, along with a balanced diet, is a critical component of a weight loss and overall health plan. You can start by thinking about the types of activities you enjoy and that’ll keep you motivated to continue. Depending of your range of motion, consider options that increase your heart rate as well as maintain or increase muscle mass; muscle helps keep your bones and joints strong while also burning more calories. To burn calories and improve cardiovascular fitness, you can try activities such as tabletop hand bikes, which have pedals for the arms, can be used indoors, and enhance the upper body. If you’re looking to get outside and enjoy some fresh air,
you can also try using an outdoor hand bike which is often used by those who don't have lower body mobility. Other options include aquatic therapy, rowing, or wheelchair sports such as basketball, tennis, football, or softball. Additionally, muscle strengthening activities using household items (such as grocery bags, soup cans, etc.) or weights can help you develop muscle.

If you’re not sure where to start, you could check out your local fitness club or recreation center for fitness classes or instruction in your area. It’s also a good idea to consult with a trainer experienced in working with people with disabilities so they can help you build an individualized program to meet your goals. In fact, the American College of Sports Medicine and the National Center on Health, Physical Activity, and Disability have joined forces to create the Certified Inclusive Fitness Trainers certification, which providers trainers the additional training to help those who may have various disabilities or health needs. You may find the following resources helpful:

- Disabled Sports USA [2]
- National Center on Health, Physical Activity, and Disability [3]

Using any or all of the resources above can help you set and achieve your physical activity goals.

Alice!
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