

Understanding what works to help older people from disadvantaged groups be more active

What is the problem?

Being physically active is really good for your health. But as people get older, they often move less—especially if they have limited time or money, or live far from facilities like leisure centres, or feel left out. Some programmes try to help people aged 50 and over to be more active, but they don't always work for everyone. We still don't know which types of programmes actually help older adults in these situations to be more active or to spend less time sitting down.

What did we do?

We looked at many studies to find out what works best to help older people from disadvantaged or often overlooked groups be more active and spend less time sitting. The studies we reviewed focused on two main questions:

1. How well physical activity programmes worked for both disadvantaged and better-off older adults, and whether there was any difference between the two groups.
2. How well programmes worked when they were designed only for disadvantaged or left-out older adults.



What did we find?

- When programmes encouraged all older adults to be more active, it wasn't clear whether they worked better for some groups than for others. A few studies suggested that setting personal goals, keeping track of activity, and having encouragement from friends could help people move more, but the evidence was mixed.
- For programmes designed specifically for older adults who are disadvantaged or often left out, some good evidence from the USA showed that they could work well for older people from minority ethnic communities. Programmes that included exercise, education, or a mix of social and physical activities sometimes helped, though not always. The results for women were inconsistent, and there was very little clear evidence for people on low incomes or those living in rural areas. We didn't find any studies that focused on other disadvantaged groups.

Across all the studies, people talked about similar barriers and enablers to being active. Common barriers included caring responsibilities, lack of transport, and limited money. Things that helped included support from friends or family, and programmes that were enjoyable, flexible, and culturally relevant to people's lives.

What does it mean?

Right now, we don't know for certain which programmes work best to help older people who are disadvantaged or often left out to be more active. Some programmes developed for minority ethnic communities in the USA look promising and might also work in the UK, but we need more careful research to find out. It's also important to remember that if programmes mainly help people who are already better off, they could increase inequalities rather than reduce them.

More information
about the project



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