Physical Therapy (For Autism Spectrum Disorder)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects both cognition and development and is present in 1 in 68 adults. Although ASD is most commonly associated with social or communication challenges, motor, tactile and physical support may also be beneficial for adults with ASD.

Physical therapy can help overcome challenges and enhance physical health.

Physical Symptoms

Each person's experience with autism will be unique, however some common physical challenges experienced may include:

- Decreased balance skills
- Difficulties with coordination tasks such as riding a bike or learning to drive a car
- Difficulty with fine motor skills such as writing or working with small objects
- Hyper- and Hyposensitivity: increased or decreased sensation surrounding physical contact with others, clothing, objects or textures
- Repetitive physical movement, such as rocking and chronic fidgeting
- Limited participation in physical activity due to challenges with social, behavioural and physical factors

Exercise and Health Promotion Impact on Client Experience

Individuals with ASD are more likely to be sedentary and have a higher risk of heart disease, diabetes and obesity.

- It has been shown that engaging in physical activity can support growth in social and environmental interactions
- Exercise can help improve activities of daily living and improve quality of life
- The Canadian physical activity guidelines suggest:
  - 150 minutes per week of aerobic activity
  - 2 - 3 days per week of strengthening activities
  - 2 - 3 days per week of flexibility activities
- These guidelines may be difficult at first, but strive to enjoy physical activity and work up to them

Saskatchewan Physiotherapy Association

Find a physiotherapist near you at www.saskphysio.org

Saskatchewan Physiotherapy Association

Saskatchewan Physiotherapy Association

Information for Caregivers

Physical activity has been found to help individuals with autism reduce displays of poor verbal or physical behaviour. Caregivers play a very important role in helping individuals with ASD maintain their health. The following suggestions can be incorporated by caregivers into daily activities to help sustain participation in physical activity:

- Offer verbal encouragement during activity, such as “good job” or “bravo”!
- Set simple goals and keep track on a chart with stickers, or an activity log
- Provide edible rewards such as popcorn, pretzels, or veggies depending on their preference
- Incorporate both group and individualized activities
- Routines are especially important. Try having physical activity sessions at the same time each day
- Incorporate physical activity into daily activities. Try racing up the stairs or walking to school
- Activities that are especially therapeutic are walking, jogging and swimming. Depending on the spectrum, activities can also include weight lifting, snowshoeing, and sport-like games

Physiotherapists Can Help

Physiotherapists can help with physical, mobility and tactile challenges that people with autism may face which can enhance quality of life.

Physiotherapists can:

- Help improve balance, coordination and walking to help move around the home and community safely
- Help improve fine motor control for tasks such as cooking, self-care, using keys and typing
- Help improve posture
- Decrease unwanted movements (hyperkinesia)
- Decrease risk of falling
- Decrease or increase sensitivity to touch
- Help set goals and achieve them!

Saskatchewan Physiotherapy Association

Find a physiotherapist near you at www.saskphysio.org