



Health Matters

## Physical activity:

Prevention and  
management of  
long-term conditions

# Physical activity: Prevention and management of long-term conditions

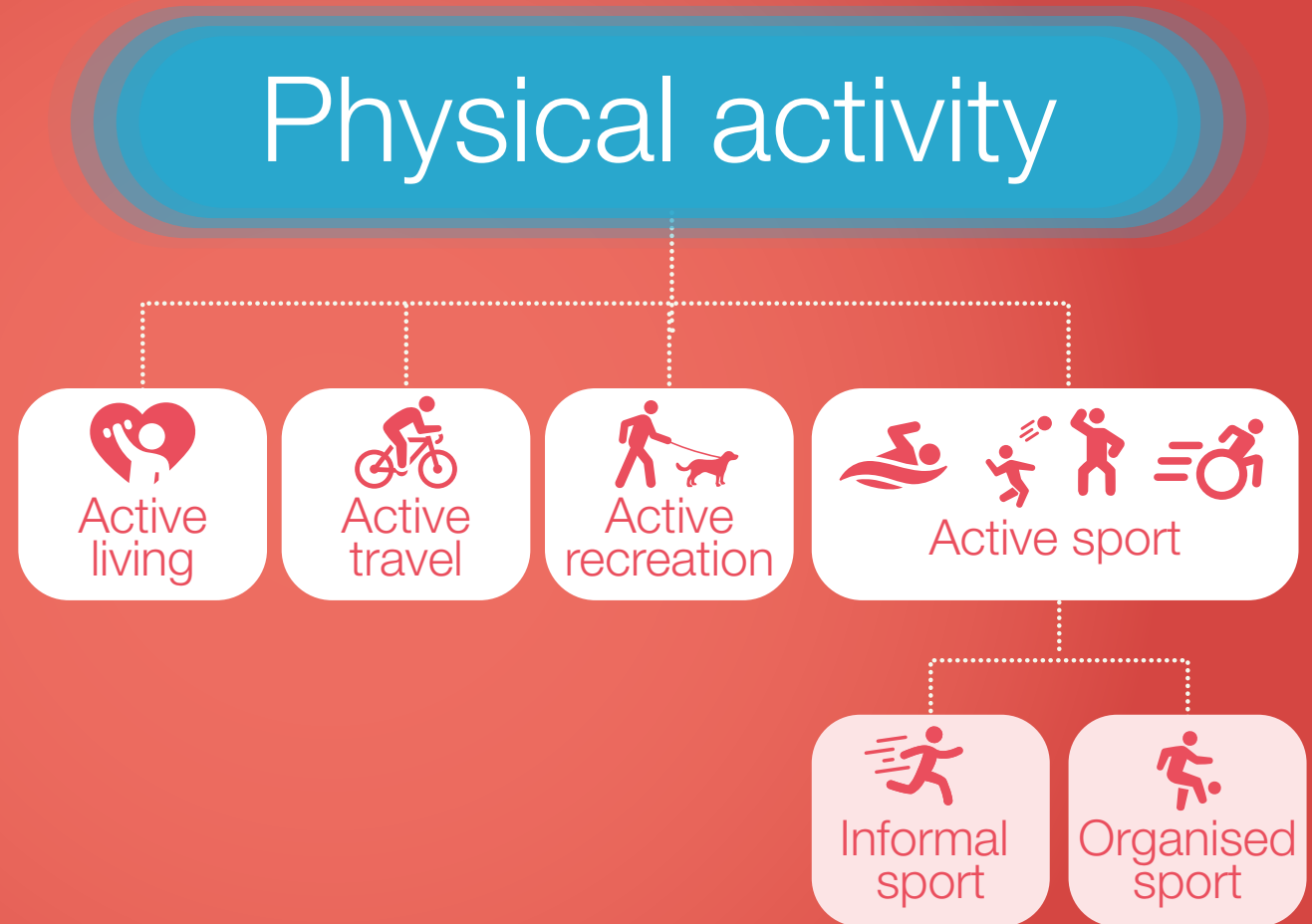
## 1. Health benefits of physical activity

In the new UK Chief Medical Officers' (CMOs) Physical Activity Guidelines launched in September 2019, the CMOs reiterated a clear message about physical activity:

*"If physical activity were a drug, we would refer to it as a miracle cure, due to the great many illnesses it can prevent and help treat."*

Regular physical activity provides a range of physical and mental health and social benefits, including:

- reducing the risk of many long-term conditions
- helping manage existing conditions
- ensuring good musculoskeletal health
- developing and maintaining physical and mental function and independence
- supporting social inclusion
- helping maintain a healthy weight
- reducing inequalities for people with long-term conditions



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## 2. Physical activity guidelines for adults

The CMOs' Physical Activity Guidelines state that for good physical and mental health, adults should aim to be physically active every day. Any activity is better than none, and more is better still.

There are 3 elements of the guidelines:

1. Strengthening activity
2. Cardiovascular activity
3. Sedentary time

There is a challenge faced in physical activity promotion with unequal emphasis on the aerobic, rather than the strength components, of the CMOs' guidelines.

Muscle and bone strengthening and balance activities are important across the lifecourse for different reasons. It is important for maintaining strength in adulthood and delaying the natural decline in muscle mass and bone density in later life.

## UK Chief Medical Officers' physical activity guidelines

Doing some physical exercise is good and every minute counts so it's never too late to start



### Build strength and improve balance

keep muscles, bones and joints strong

### Be active

including moderate, vigorous and very vigorous activities

### Minimise sedentary time

break up periods of inactivity

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## 3. Adults with long-term conditions

In England, 15 million people are living with one or more long-term health conditions. 1 in 3 of the working age population have at least one long term condition and 1 in 7 have more than one.

Regular physical activity can help to prevent and manage a range of chronic conditions and diseases, many of which are on the rise and affecting people at an earlier age.

For many of these conditions, such as type 2 diabetes and lower back pain, physical activity is as good or better than treatment with drugs.

This edition of Health Matters also discusses the wider social, environmental and economic benefits of physical activity for individuals, communities and wider society.

## Physically active people have lower health risks



Source: Physical Activity Guidelines Advisory Committee Scientific report (2018); Department of Health & Human Services – USA

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## 4. Inequalities in physical inactivity

There are inequalities in physical activity across socioeconomic status and the protected characteristics, including:

- age
- gender
- disability
- race
- sexual orientation and gender identity

These compound or exacerbate other inequalities and lead to physical inactivity being more prevalent in certain groups.

Inactive people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are also more likely to undertake unhealthy behaviours such as smoking, alcohol consumption and have a poor diet.

The UK CMOs' guidelines say that for both adults with and without disabilities, the risk of adverse events from physical activity is relatively low and the health benefits accrued outweigh the risks.

## Inequalities in physical activity

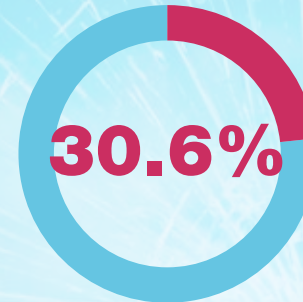


**37.0%**  
of disabled people  
were inactive

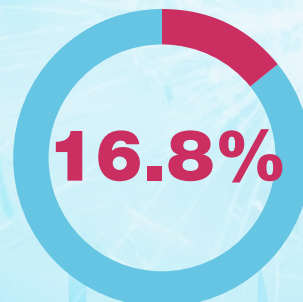


**18.2%**  
of those with no  
disabilities  
were inactive

### Physical inactivity data (less than 30 minutes per week)



of people  
from the  
**most**  
deprived decile



of people  
from the  
**least**  
deprived decile

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### 5. Support for healthcare professionals

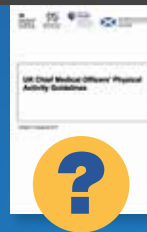
1 in 4 people would be more active if advised by a healthcare professional. They therefore play a unique role in supporting people to be more physically active.

However, a survey of 1,000 GPs found that 80% of GPs in England are unfamiliar with the national physical activity guidelines and less than half are confident in raising physical activity with patients.

There are multiple initiatives and training programmes that exist to support healthcare professionals to discuss physical activity with patients, and embed prevention and physical activity promotion into clinical practice, including:

- The Moving Healthcare Professionals Programme
- Moving Medicine
- Physical Activity Clinical Champions training
- E-learning courses

### Support healthcare professionals to discuss physical activity with patients

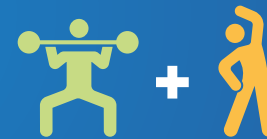


80%

of GPs in England are **unfamiliar** with the physical activity guidelines

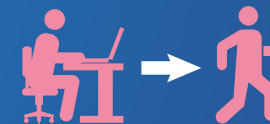


Be active



Minimise sedentary time

only



Build strength and improve balance

16%

of physiotherapists knew about all 3 elements of the physical activity guidelines