

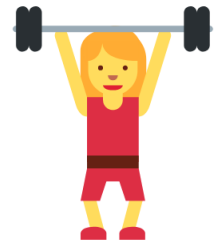
# HIV and Physical Activity

*Making fitness centres more accessible for people living with HIV*

## Background

Recommendations for physical activity indicate that adults in Canada should participate in 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity each week.<sup>1</sup> Physical activity has benefits for people of all ages which include improved learning and long-term memory, lower risk of chronic disease, and increased life expectancy, among other advantages. For people living with chronic health conditions, physical activity can help with managing symptoms, slow down the progression of illness, and prevent development of additional chronic conditions.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, physical activity is considered to be a low-cost way to promote chronic disease prevention and to encourage overall

health.<sup>3</sup> Several Canadian organizations are dedicated to encouraging physical activity throughout the lives of people in Canada.<sup>4,5</sup> Community-based HIV organizations and fitness centres also have an important role to play in promoting physical activity people living with HIV.



## Issue

Despite the known benefits and national-level initiatives, less than 20% of adults in Canada participate in the recommended amount of physical activity.<sup>6,7</sup> People living with HIV have been found to participate in physical activity at even lower rates than the general population.<sup>8,9</sup> Reasons for decreased participation can be attributed, at least partially, to various individual and social barriers that people living with HIV may experience such as pain, limited social support, financial constraints, accessibility concerns, and fear of stigma. People living with HIV often live with more comorbid chronic health conditions than the non-HIV infected population.<sup>10,11</sup> Along with this burden of chronic health conditions, women living with HIV are especially likely to face barriers as a result of their HIV status.

## Recommendations

In the community, there are various settings where a person can participate in physical activity, whether individually or as part of a group. Fitness facilities, including private gyms and local community centres, are popular options which can be found in most communities. The appeal and utility of both for-profit and not-for-profit facilities is vastly improved when steps are taken to address the needs of an aging population of people living with chronic health conditions, including PLWHIV, in member programming. This entails a comprehensive organizational approach that involves initiatives at the policy, staff, and programming levels:



## 1. Policy: Creating a welcoming environment

- a.** Stigma continues to be a concern for people living with HIV. Physical activity organizations should look to develop a culture of acceptance which can include anti-stigma initiatives such as looking to implement community strategies described in the UNAIDS 2014 Guidance Note - Reduction of HIV-related stigma and discrimination.
- b.** This culture of acceptance can be incorporated into both the organization's values and their policies, including those related to hiring and human resources.

## 2. Staff: All staff should embody the organizational policies on acceptance

- a.** Staff should be provided with anti-stigma training to ensure that they understand the impact of intersecting forms of stigma, and that they are able to model the organizational values of acceptance and equal opportunity, and promote their uptake among the population the facility serves.
- b.** Senior staff and management should exemplify these policies through explicit acceptance of all people who are looking to utilize and/or work at the facility.

## 3. Programming: Accessible programming for all is a must

- a.** Programs accessible to people of all abilities, education levels, lived experiences, financial means etc., should be developed and promoted, especially within high-needs communities and priority neighbourhoods. This strategy is enhanced with the introduction of a sliding fee scale and/or subsidized memberships.
- b.** Partnerships should be explored between the facility and local HIV organizations. This partnership may involve offering introductory physical activity programs onsite at the local HIV organization, or providing education for the organization's staff and volunteers. In turn, these initiatives may lead to increased membership at the fitness facility.

This actively accepting, non-discriminatory, inclusive environment, implemented in a comprehensive manner, encourages participation not only from people living with HIV but all people of varying abilities and backgrounds.

## References

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