

Exercise Tips and Resources for Individuals with a Visual Impairment

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When you hear the word exercise, do you cringe? Do you picture a gym full of muscle-bound instructors and equipment you can't use? Have you ever thought that exercise is just one more activity you can no longer do since you lost your sight?

Well, fear not: You *can* exercise. And what's more, you should. Not only does exercise improve your overall physical health, but it also helps your mental well-being. Studies show that a lack of physical activity can worsen one's severity of visual field loss, particularly in glaucoma patients.

(Bennett, 2020)

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that adults 18-64 years of age do at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise and two days of muscle strengthening per week. In addition, adults over 65 should include activities that improve balance, such as yoga or standing on one foot. (CDC, 2020) We have researched and found accessible resources for adults of all ages and fitness levels. (Always consult with your doctor before beginning an exercise regimen.)

General tips:

- Start slow; don't overdo it. Add a little more each time. You will be more likely to stick with your chosen exercise program long-term.
- Always hydrate before and after exercising.
- Include a warm-up and cool-down period to help reduce soreness.
- Don't be afraid to ask for assistance. Having a partner makes exercise more enjoyable and helps keep you accountable.

Exercise For Consumers Under 65

Gyms can be challenging places for the visually impaired. However, many find that smaller gyms offer more personalized services and are easier to navigate because they have less equipment and fewer patrons.

Here are some tips to make navigating gyms easier.

- Request an appointment to tour the facility with your mobility instructor.
- Tie a bandana around the rail of the gym's indoor walking track to use as a landmark when you're ready to leave.
- Ask a personal trainer or other staff member to show you how to use each piece of equipment and to set your desired weight levels.
- Choose an easy-to-locate locker to store belongings, and bring a key lock with a lanyard.
- Use your cane or a guide to avoid tripping over towels and bags. Shorten your sweep or arc in crowded areas.

If you have an orthopedic problem such as arthritis, aquatic exercise is a joint-friendly movement you can enjoy with needed accommodations. For safety, always swim with a partner or in the presence of a lifeguard. Always use a cane or a guide around the perimeter of water.

- Meet with the water aerobics instructor in advance to learn the movements needed for classes.
- If you swim laps, count your number of strokes, or use either a brightly colored marker or audio clue at each end of the pool.
- Check your local YMCA or local pool for class descriptions and times. For more information about swimming with accommodations, go to: <https://visionaware.org/everyday-living/recreation-and-leisure/sports-and-exercise/swimming-6126/1235/>

If running is more your style, there are ways to enjoy this activity despite your visual impairment. Many consumers use a guide runner either to give verbal instructions or to hold a tether. Check out

<https://visionaware.org/everyday-living/recreation-and-leisure/sports-and-exercise/running-2805/1235/> for more information on guide runners.

While going to gyms may prove challenging and exciting, you may feel that exercising at home might better suit your lifestyle. YouTube has many videos that you can do at any time, such as:

Leslie Sansone Walk at Home. Leslie uses four basic moves to “get in the groove.” She announces upcoming movements so those with low vision can prepare for the next move. She also has a variety of videos ranging from 15 minutes to an hour to suit your schedule. Check Leslie out on YouTube or go to her website at <http://walkathome.com>

Eyes Free Fitness offers a variety of exercises with easily understood auditory descriptions for all age groups and ability levels. Blind Alive founder Mel Scott, who herself is visually impaired, designed Eyes Free Fitness to be accessible and interesting for those who are either fully blind or who have limited vision. We will discuss Eyes Free Fitness in detail later.

Gentle Exercises for Seniors

Important Notes: Always check with your medical doctor before beginning any exercise program. In the videos that use a chair, a simple, stable one is best, such as a wooden kitchen chair. For safety reasons, avoid using an upholstered “poofy” chair with cushions, a recliner, or an office chair with wheels. (You’ll need a home computer or smartphone with internet access to use YouTube.)

Among the YouTube channels specifically designed to help seniors are:

Pau’s Secrets This channel includes such videos as “Yoga for the Blind and Visually Impaired Students (Faith Yoga) Video 1”; it’s good for all ages, especially seniors. This program can be done on a yoga mat on the floor,

or while seated in a chair. To associate with her potential blind students, the teacher learned how to do these lessons while being blindfolded. You should find each exercise in this 30-minute program highly relaxing.

<https://youtu.be/mjvJTWddPR0>

- **Eyes-Free Fitness** offers, among other videos, “**Flirting with Balance, Audio Only**” (app. 35 minutes, <https://youtu.be/EqJPnfQmsYI>); and “**Chair Yoga, Audio Only**” (app. 40 minutes, <https://youtu.be/XYK2TDApv2Y>)
- **Mindful Chair Yoga** gives consumers two gentle stretching videos which are wonderful for easing anxiety. (The audio descriptions on both are excellent and the exercises are calming.) Those videos are: “**Mindful Chair Yoga: A Playful Practice**” (20 minutes, <https://youtu.be/-WBAc7uAoWU>); and “**Mindful Chair Yoga: A Beginner’s Practice to Relieve Neck and Shoulder Tension**” (19 minutes, <https://youtu.be/YF8proB938U>).

The latter video mentioned above is outstanding for easing muscle tension in the neck and shoulder, areas where white cane users often feel pain or discomfort.

Journaling

If you have diabetes or any other debilitating condition, you may find keeping a journal to be helpful and productive. In your journal, you can share your thoughts and emotions related to your illness and see how you’re progressing emotionally as well as physically. Exercise stimulates various brain chemicals that may elevate your mood and promote relaxation. Prayer, meditation, guided imagery, yoga and relaxation techniques also can help reduce stress on both a short-term and long-term basis.

Also, feel free to look for local hospitals or organizations that may teach classes on meditation techniques. While doing so, you may be able to supplement the classes with take-home practice CDs. Many senior and community centers offer such classes and opportunities for socialization.

References

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CDC, (2020) Physical Activity <https://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/basics/age-chart.html>

Eyes Free Fitness (2019, October 29) Flirting with Balance [Video] URL: <https://youtu.be/EqJPnfQmsYI>

Eyes Free Fitness (2019, April) Chair Yoga, Audio Only [Video] URL: <https://youtu.be/XYK2TDApv2Y>

Mindful Chair Yoga (2013, May 27) A Playful Practice [Video] URL: <https://youtu.be/-WBAC7uAoWU>

Mindful Chair Yoga (2013, April 8) Mindful Chair Yoga: A Beginner's Practice to Relieve Neck and Shoulder Tension [Video] URL: <https://youtu.be/YF8proB938U>

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