

# Guidelines on Promoting **the Safe Return of Older People to Recreational Sport and Physical Activity**



Incorporating **Age & Opportunity active**,  
The National Sport and Physical Activity Programme  
for Older People



# Introduction

In order to support those of you involved in the provision of physical activity programmes for older people Age & Opportunity brought a group of stakeholders together in June 2020 to develop this guidance resource.

Feedback from the group is that there has been a significant reduction in physical activity by older people during the pandemic period. In addition, the group believes that there are significant barriers to the resumption of physical activity linked to increased anxiety, nervousness, loss of confidence, feelings of exclusion, weakening of physical activity related social contacts and physical deconditioning among many older people.

We all want to see older people come back to recreational sport and physical activity and so we hope the following guidance will help you inform, encourage, build confidence and in particular reassure older people as they return to a more active lifestyle, in accordance with the public health guidelines and the recommendations of your own sporting body or organisation.



## Mind Your Language!

When engaging with older people, appropriate language and tone are most important in challenging ageism and encouraging their participation in sport, physical activity and other meaningful pursuits. Older people or older persons are the most appropriate terms to use. The 'er' qualifier makes it more acceptable and inclusive than just old and it recognises a continuum of ageing, all older people are not the same age.

Referring to older people as the elderly, geriatrics, senior citizens, pensioners or OAPs is not what Age & Opportunity recommend. None of these terms have equal or opposite terms in common use and each one reinforces a negative stereotype. Likewise, frequent use of the terms "vulnerable", "frail", "underlying conditions" linked to older people suggests that it is appropriate and indeed necessary to make decisions about this group which are "for their good". Such terms make critical analysis of these decisions and discussion of possible alternatives very difficult.

## Challenges Facing Older People Returning to Recreational Sport and Physical Activity

- Loss of confidence in their ability to be physically active after cocooning for months;
- Increased anxiety about their own health;
- The stigma attached to being classed as a “vulnerable” group and feeling alienated from society;
- Confusion and lack of clarity about the national public health advice relating to physical activity;
- Physical decline and possible deconditioning due to inactivity;
- Increased loneliness due to lack of social contact;
- Lack of social support linked to the absence of group physical activity in their lives;
- Those having contracted Covid 19 taking a long time to recover;
- Lack of access to and knowledge of internet use;
- Safety concerns regarding returning to recreational sport or a facility;
- Concerns about using public transport.

## Solutions for Overcoming these Challenges

### Reminding and Reassuring Older People of Positive Benefits of Exercise and Fitness

- Physical activity for all older people is positive for their physical and mental health;
- This is true for ‘healthy’ older people and those with medical (underlying) conditions of all ages;
- Unfitness or poor physical conditioning causes or increases poor health and reduces quality of life;
- Inactivity is bad for your health at any age, whether you have a medical condition or not;
- Involvement in physical activity in either individual or group contexts increases opportunities for building social contacts and strengthening social networks.

### Physical Activity Advice to those who have Deconditioned

- Older people who have been inactive for some time may have reduced strength, flexibility, balance or overall fitness levels. This should be taken into account when older people are being reintroduced back to recreational sport and physical activity;
- The level of activity best suited for older people is described as ‘moderate intensity’, engaged in for at least 30 minutes on five or more days of every week;
- Activities could range from walking, stretching, cycling, working in the garden or washing the car, to lifting light weights, practising yoga or tai chi.

## Confidence Building

- Older people need to feel a sense of ownership and purpose;
- Work with individuals to set specific goals for their return to physical activity and recreational sport;
- Invite older people to co-design a return to activity plan with you, for themselves or their group.



### Outdoor activities

Prioritise more outdoor activities for older people e.g. walking / cycling programmes where there is less risk of virus transmission. Consider adapting traditional indoor activities to an outdoor space if possible;

### Designated times

Choose a specific time for the initial return to activity which is exclusively for older people. Knowing the initial session will be carefully managed will help limit any apprehension of returning.

### Small group sizes

Accommodating smaller group sizes will help older people to return to activity as there will be less apprehension regarding large crowds and their ability to socially distance;

### Social aspect

For many older people, the social element of their activities is just as important as the exercise. Care should be taken that a cuppa and a chat post-activity are not dismissed as being unnecessary when redesigning programmes;

### Designated outdoor spaces

'Bring Your Own' options could be used to accommodate socially distanced interaction;

### Re-orientation events

A 'welcome back' event, day, time slot or publication could be created specifically for older people. This may provide an opportunity to visit your facility or location in order to reassure

them that all appropriate measures have been put in place regarding their safe return to activity;

### Mentoring

A specific older peoples' mentor could be nominated across your facility or sports organisation. This would give older people a specific individual contact who could answer any new or ongoing concerns relating to themselves or their groups. This could also be handed down to a member of that group then, once people are happy and settled back in;

### Buddy system

A buddy system could be put in place where older people are linked in with other members of your facility or organisation to assist with their return. Friends may be slower to return to use the facility and having an identifiable support person, even for their initial visit, may increase their likelihood to return. This could also help to promote intergenerational solidarity;

### Obtain feedback

Allow for some time pre and post-session to address any concern that older people may have. This feedback from the participants themselves will be very useful in order to continue adapting your return to sport procedures. Ensure to conduct ongoing informal feedback during sessions, perhaps at break times;

## Older People's Views on Covid-19 and Cocooning

“I have found the lockdown very hard. I was being active but I need the company for the motivation so I have stopped. I have no internet access and I struggle with technology.” Frank, Men's Shed Member\*

“I am feeling anxious. I am reluctant to go out and to return to the shed. My physical activity has gone down as I haven't been going out. I am nervous to be too active on my own after an injury, don't want to go through it again.” Nigel, Men's Shed Member\*

“I felt very positive about the way people adhered to social distancing while shopping or out walking, but feel the lockdown has dented our confidence somewhat.”  
Mary Kennedy

“It was the weirdest feeling good one day and awful another day. Wanting to do so much but couldn't get motivated. Comfort eating putting on pounds it was a helpless feeling.”  
Sylvia K, Grange Woodbine

“I am living alone so I miss the comradery and having someone to talk to about things. I don't have a computer so I am a bit left behind.” Peter, Men's Shed Member\*

“I'm still a bit nervous when I see young people not heeding the rules. Not wearing masks and grouping together as if there is no virus.” Margaret McHugh

# Resources Available

Contact Age & Opportunity for further resources by visiting our website

[www.ageandopportunity.ie](http://www.ageandopportunity.ie) or phone 01 8057709

## Useful contacts

[www.sportireland.ie/covid19](http://www.sportireland.ie/covid19)

[www.irelandactive.ie](http://www.irelandactive.ie)

[www.hse.ie/coronavirus](http://www.hse.ie/coronavirus)

[www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/olderpeople/tipsforhealthyliving/keepingactive](http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/olderpeople/tipsforhealthyliving/keepingactive)

Please Note: All activity should be consistent with the government guidance regarding health, social distancing and hygiene. See latest Government updates at [www.gov.ie/covid19](http://www.gov.ie/covid19)

Age & Opportunity Active Covid Stakeholder Group consists of:

John Kerrane (Independent Chair), Aisling McGrath (Waterford Institute of Technology), Jason King (Get Ireland Walking), Caitriona Geraghty (Fingal LSP), Brian Staunton (Sport Ireland), Mary O'Meara (Dept. Public Health), Sylvia Guckian (Physical Activity Leader, Grange Woodbine), Tom Lillis (Physical Activity Leader, Kingswood & Kilmanagh Men's Club) Margo Finnegan (Cycling Ireland), Caroline Peppard (HSE), Claire Hurley (Cork LSP), Bernie Murray (CarePAL, Sunbeam House), Sue Guildea, Paul Gallier, Mary Harkin and Karen Horgan (Age & Opportunity) July 2020.