

Get yourself active

The English Federation of Disability Sport (EFDS) has found that most disabled people are keen to get more active, but many aren't sure how. From yoga to wheelchair racing, Emma Bowler finds out what's on offer and where to start





Did you know that Prama (which uses flashing lights and interactive flooring), trampolining, and immersive spin (where images on huge screens take you to another world while exercising) are just some of this year's 'on trend' ways of getting active? Whilst you might immediately exclaim, "I can't do any of that!", the point is that there are now *hundreds* of ways to increase your activity levels – it's not just about running, swimming or cycling anymore.

A Sport England survey found that four out of five disabled people take little or no exercise, but it appears that this isn't because they don't want to. Research by the English Federation of Disability Sport (EFDS) found that seven in ten disabled people *do* want to increase how active they are, but are concerned about barriers or just don't know where to start.

INCLUSIVE FITNESS

The good news is that sporting venues are covered by the Equality Act 2010, so they must make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled people. That's what they've been doing, with increasing numbers of leisure centres and sports clubs becoming more accessible.

EFDS has been supporting leisure centres to become more welcoming to disabled people for many years. The result is that nearly 400 gyms now meet EFDS's standards and are IFI (Inclusive Fitness Initiative) accredited.

At the end of 2017, the Government unveiled a pioneering scheme led by ukactive, Sport England, Disability Rights UK and the English Federation of Disability Sport, which aims to remove barriers to physical activity for disabled people. The initiative will create flagship sites with six operators: PureGym, David Lloyd Leisure, Everyone Active, Virgin Active, Greenwich Leisure Ltd and Places for People.

Ben Andrews is a health coach running an NHS-funded fitness scheme called Empower, incubated by Salford social enterprise Unlimited Potential.

"Although 78% of disabled people would like to keep active, they feel they are limited, or completely prevented, due to the barriers they face," says Ben. "So, it's about working with the person, those around them, and activity providers, acknowledging the barriers they may encounter and working together to come up with effective solutions. In this way, the person can

make long-term changes to their activity levels, and in turn their health, beyond the support that Empower offers. We can all move more, we can all reap the benefits of an active lifestyle – it's about finding what is right for you."

Sharon Connolly, a wheelchair user from Salford, Manchester, has been working with Ben for three months. She started out using resistance bands at home, and now attends the Salford-based Brain and Spinal Injury Centre (BASIC), which employs passive equipment to move her body for two hourly sessions per week.

"I've definitely noticed an improvement in moving my arms. It's also giving me more confidence, because I'm able to get out and do something. Before that I was just sat inside," says Sue. "I'm going to keep going with it because I want to be able to lift my grandson up and I want to be able to stand up on my own."

WEIGH UP THE BENEFITS

There are so many benefits of being more active, from weight loss and a reduced risk of heart disease, stroke, diabetes and dementia, to improved memory and brain function. It isn't surprising, then, that being more active



Wheelchair racer, Maya!



Sailability fan, Peter



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also has a very positive impact on mental health, increasing confidence and self-esteem while reducing depression, stress and anxiety. That's not to mention the social benefits if you decide to do an activity with others.

Wheelchair user Peter Wagner has cerebral palsy, which affects his motor skills. He had to search around to find an activity he could do, but once he discovered Sailability – the RYA national programme enabling disabled people to try sailing – he was away!

“Sailing has given me so much pleasure and I get a great feeling of self-reliance and confidence from being able to do it,” says Peter. “Such freedom is seldom available to disabled people.”

Nowadays, Peter races Paralympic-class dinghies every week during the spring and summer.

Peter says, “It can be competitive but in a friendly manner and there's a lot of banter between the race participants. So, as well as being active and having a great time on the water, I've also made loads of new friends.”

Getting active doesn't have to be about sailing races, running a marathon

or becoming a ‘gym bunny’. It's about finding something that's right for you.

Louise Edwards lives with a form of cerebral palsy that causes hypermobility, together with a very sensitive startle reflex, which means loud and unexpected noises cause her to lose balance, and she'll often fall over. Louise found that travelling to work for an hour by tube in central London was pushing her physical and nervous system to the limit. After doing some research she came across Adaptive Yoga – yoga adapted for disabled people.

“I had tried regular yoga classes but they were beyond my limits,” says Louise. “I'd also done some Pilates and rehab gym sessions. I still do Pilates but it's the Adaptive Yoga that gives me so much more nourishment and joy – it's my desert island must-have!”

Attending weekly Adaptive Yoga classes at the Westway Sports Centre and also practising it at home, Louise has found the activity has had several positive effects.

“Yoga has really transformed how I think about myself,” she says. “The class is a space where I can express my struggle and just be who I am on that

day – no matter how wobbly. Physically, yoga has improved my balance and coordination, it eases pain, and I use it to support myself through difficulties and setbacks.”

Louise was lucky to live near an Adaptive Yoga class, but there are yoga classes for beginners all over the country. Discuss your requirements with the yoga teacher before you start to see how they might be able to adapt things for you.

ACTIVE AT ANY AGE

Keep in mind that age is no barrier to getting more active. On the Get Yourself Active website (see *Facilities and funding* on the next page), five-year-old wheelchair user, Maya, loves swimming, riding her trike, dancing and going to the skate park. She has used a self-propelling wheelchair from a very young age, having been gifted a lightweight wheelchair, which meant she could do that safely. Maya's now seriously into wheelchair racing!

Terry Moseley, President of the British Disabled Angling Association (BDAA), and a “not so old 58”, says, “I can no longer do the high-energy activity I used to do, but I love the balance of rehabilitating therapeutic activity and



sport I get from fishing. “It’s not all just sitting there for hours in the rain waiting for a fish to bite. For starters, it’s no mean feat trying to pull in a 400lb blue marlin, a 12lb sea bass or casting a fly,” he says. “So, angling is a great way of making sure I have some productive activity in my life, and it gives me a positive sense of achievement – as well as using some muscles that would otherwise be redundant.”

WHERE THERE’S A WILL...

... there’s a way. With so many activities out there: table tennis, walking, white-water rafting, dancing (including wheelchair dancing), horse-riding, Tai Chi, tennis (including wheelchair tennis), resistance-band workouts, archery and bowling, to name just a few – there’s sure to be something worth trying out.

If you believe that an activity is out of bounds due to your disability, keep in mind that nearly every activity can be adapted. For example, when it comes to cycling, there’s a huge range of bikes on offer now – tricycles, quad cycles, hand cycles, power-assisted bikes and tandems, as well as static bikes you can use at home while watching TV.

For one reason or another, you might feel your good intentions to go to the gym or swimming three times a week will fall by the wayside, or perhaps your finances just won’t stretch that far, but you can still incorporate some activity into your everyday life. You could exercise while watching TV, do housework or gardening, try some stretches while you clean your teeth or sit on your stairlift, or use a games console or a fitness app to motivate you. Even a small bit of activity is better than none, and you’ll be surprised how it all mounts up in a day.

Oh, and if you think that not being able to swim means you can’t sail, Peter says, “I’ve been sailing with Sailability for eight years and I can’t swim – so there is no excuse. I promise you, you’ll thoroughly enjoy it.” However, if you are interested in learning to swim, head over to *Take the plunge* on page 49.

At the end of the day, the most powerful barrier to getting active could be your mind-set. So remember, you’re never too late, too young or too old to take up a new activity – and who knows where it will take you! ■

Facilities and funding

Once you’ve found an activity you’d like to try, here are some sites that will help you check out local facilities and the funding available

Get Yourself Active

020 3687 0780

**[getyourselfactive.org/
information-in-your-
local-area/](http://getyourselfactive.org/information-in-your-local-area/)**

Empower

0161 743 0088

**[unlimitedpotential.org.
uk/enterprise/innovation-
projects/empower](http://unlimitedpotential.org.uk/enterprise/innovation-projects/empower)**

BASIC

0161 707 6441

basiccharity.org.uk

British Disabled Angling Association

bdaa.co.uk

Sailability

0844 556 9550

**[rya.org.uk/programmes/
rya-sailability](http://rya.org.uk/programmes/rya-sailability)**

Adaptive Yoga UK

adaptiveyogauk.com

NHS’s guide to yoga

**[nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness/
Pages/yoga.aspx](http://nhs.uk/Livewell/fitness/Pages/yoga.aspx)**

Find an activity event near you

01509 227750

**[efds.co.uk/get-active/
events](http://efds.co.uk/get-active/events)**

ukactive

020 7400 8600

ukactive.com