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Exercise for Individuals with Eye Impairments

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VISUAL IMPAIRMENT CAN RESULT

from many different factors, including systemic health problems such as diabetes, circulatory problems, cataracts, macular degeneration and injury to the eye or head. The subsequent visual impairment varies according to the degree of visual loss (0 – 100 percent) and the type of visual loss (central, peripheral, unilateral or bilateral). Exercise provides numerous benefits to all persons, including those with visual impairments.

The following guidelines will help in establishing an exercise routine following the diagnosis of an eye disorder or a significant change in an existing eye disorder.

Seek Professional Help

First, meet with an exercise professional who can conduct a thorough assessment of your health history, exercise history and desired exercise goals. This professional should understand the unique challenges you face and modify the exercise program and equipment as necessary. Working with a fitness professional ensures that you receive the necessary supervision and that your exercise program will be monitored appropriately. This is very important because fitness goals, exercise routines and equipment modification often must be revised to further enhance satisfaction and performance.

Commit to a Program

View exercise as part of your routine activities. Set short-term, achievable exercise goals with a certified exercise professional who will encourage you to keep focused on long-term objectives. Setting goals is an important task when returning to an exercise program or starting a new one, and should be based on accurate assessment results. Setting unrealistic fitness goals can leave you feeling negative, but modest, realistic goals build confidence and enthusiasm, making exercise more fun.

Be Mindful

It is also important to know when to limit physical activity. Consult with the treating ophthalmologist before beginning any type of exercise program, particularly if you have recently had an eye operation or are at risk for intraocular bleeding (e.g., persons diagnosed with diabetes or age-related macular degeneration). In such cases, strenuous activity should be avoided. Instead, consider low-impact aerobic exercises such as walking or swimming. When weight training, use lighter weights and focus on increasing repetitions over time rather than

increasing the amount of weight lifted. Avoid exercises that stress isometric muscle contractions (e.g., pushing against an immovable object). Each activity must be monitored to ensure that high levels of perceived exertion are avoided.

Maintain Positive Attitude

Keeping a positive mental attitude will also help with motivation. This is essential to any exercise program, especially for people who are beginning or reestablishing a routine. Here are some additional tips for keeping exercise enjoyable:

- ◆ Keep routines interesting and fun. Choose activities you enjoy or feel comfortable with. Vary types of exercise you do over time so you can avoid falling into a rut. Exercise variables must be changed not for the sake of interest, but also to foster progress.
- ◆ Make your exercise routine fit your personality and daily lifestyle with respect to time, location, expense and degree of social interaction. The more comfortable the routine, the more likely you will be to maintain it.
- ◆ Even when you are feeling tired or stressed, try to maintain your program. You will feel better following your workout than when you started.
- ◆ Focus on your achievements, no matter how small. Remember persistence pays off.

Safety Precautions

Consult your physician before beginning a program. Be sure the facility's equipment is modified to guard your safety. This means that all obstacles are removed and that doors are completely closed or completely open. When needed, use a sighted person as a buddy if you are not working with a trainer at that time. Exercise should be terminated if you experience symptoms such as a loss or dimming of vision, new floaters (spots or shapes floating through vision) or light flashes.

After some time has passed and you feel more comfortable, increase your everyday activities. For example, if it is safe, walk to the grocery store, drug store, post office, etc. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Then move on to adding aerobic exercise (walking, swimming, biking, running), flexibility (stretching, yoga), and strength training (weights, push-ups, crunches) as you become more consistent.

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