

BRIGHTER FUTURES

Staying Active as a Wheelchair User

Practical ideas for everyday movement

A short guide to aerobic activity, strength and mobility

This guide offers general activity information. It is not physiotherapy, rehabilitation or medical advice.

Originally developed by Rainbow Action Group
Revised by Brighter Futures - August 2026

Finding activity that works for you

Wheelchair users are not a single group. People use different chairs, have different levels of mobility and may have very different reasons for using a wheelchair. The most useful activity is therefore activity that suits your own body, chair, health and interests.

Before you begin

If you are new to exercise, have not exercised for some time, or have pain, fatigue, a medical condition or concerns about what is safe for you, speak to a GP, physiotherapist or another health professional involved with your care. Individual advice is particularly important where seating, posture or joint movement is restricted.

What does current guidance say?

NHS guidance for wheelchair users emphasises both aerobic activity and muscle-strengthening activity. For adults aged 19 to 64, the general target is at least 150 minutes of aerobic activity each week together with strength work on two or more days. If that sounds a long way off, starting with a short period of enjoyable activity and building gradually is more useful than doing nothing.

Source: NHS fitness advice for wheelchair users, checked August 2026.

Ways to be active

Aerobic activity

Aerobic activity is movement that raises your heart rate and makes you warmer and a little more out of breath. NHS guidance suggests that someone who is not used to exercise can begin with short sessions and build up gradually.

- pushing or manoeuvring your wheelchair, where this is appropriate for you
- wheelchair exercise or workout sessions
- swimming or pool-based activity where suitable facilities are available
- adapted rowing or other accessible cardiovascular equipment
- wheelchair sports such as basketball, netball or badminton

Strength

Repeated wheelchair propulsion can place a lot of work through the chest and shoulders. NHS guidance notes that strengthening the muscles supporting the shoulders and the muscles of the back can be useful. Depending on your mobility, this might involve resistance bands, adapted gym equipment or other exercises recommended for you.

Avoid assuming that a standard upper-body programme will suit everyone. A physiotherapist or appropriately qualified exercise professional can help select movements that take account of your posture, shoulder health and wheelchair use.

Mobility and stretching

Gentle mobility work can help maintain comfortable movement. Shoulder, chest, neck and upper-back movements may be useful for some wheelchair users, particularly where the same pushing posture is repeated throughout the day. Stretch only within a comfortable range and never force a joint.

A few practical principles

- Make the chair secure. Before doing a stationary exercise, make sure your wheelchair is stable and use the brakes where appropriate.
- Start with what you can do. A short period of activity can be a perfectly reasonable starting point.
- Build gradually. Increase time or effort slowly rather than making large jumps from one session to the next.
- Pay attention to pain and fatigue. Stop if an activity causes pain, dizziness, unusual shortness of breath or makes you feel unwell.
- Think about your shoulders. If you propel a manual wheelchair, your shoulders already do a great deal of work. Strength and mobility exercises should complement, rather than simply add more strain to, that workload.
- Choose activities you actually like. Exercise is easier to maintain when it is enjoyable and fits into ordinary life.

There is no single “wheelchair exercise programme”

Your chair, level of movement, medical history and goals all affect what is appropriate. If you would like a structured programme, ask a physiotherapist or another appropriately qualified professional for advice tailored to you.

Further information

For current guidance and activity ideas, search the NHS website for “fitness advice for wheelchair users”.

Reviewed against NHS guidance in August 2026. Brighter Futures does not provide medical treatment, rehabilitation or physiotherapy through this publication.