



Wheelchair Exercises

by Cindy Asch-Martin

WHEN WE THINK OF EXERCISE, there are some who may think that only fit or able-bodied people are capable of doing it. But exercise is meant to be a part of everyone's lives, regardless of your physical or emotional condition. Exercise provides many positive aspects to our everyday life, such as releasing endorphins for a happier you, to helping alleviate the pain of arthritis, to strengthening our bodies, to name just a few benefits.

Just because some of us may be restricted in what we can do and how we can do it doesn't mean exercise is out of the question. For example, there are sports designed specifically for wheelchair users, as well as daily exercises that one can do in a wheelchair.

There are various reasons why some amputees may choose to use a wheelchair – for example, it may be too painful to wear a prosthesis; a prosthesis may be in need of repair; or one may be unable to afford a prosthesis.

If you belong to a gym you have many forms of exercises to choose from. Depending on your abilities, you may be able to transfer yourself from your wheelchair to a piece of equipment; this will also provide extra strengthening in simply maneuvering over

to the bench. All upper-body exercises (trapezius, shoulders, chest, back, triceps and biceps) can be done with dumbbells, kettle bells or machines.

If you don't have access to a gym, then home exercises are available to help you stay strong and healthy.

For those who can transfer to a bed, chair or the floor, the possibilities are greater for more variety than if you must exercise only in your wheelchair, but you too can benefit with a good number of exercises to keep you strong.

The category you fit into will also determine how many different exercises you can do. If you are a bilateral amputee without prostheses, then you should be able to strengthen your upper body. If you are an AK, BK or knee disarticulation amputee, then you have the ability to exercise at least one leg as well as your upper body.

Working your own body weight is one of the more productive ways to exercise. It is actually harder to use your own body than it is to pull or push a piece of equipment.

Let's try a home workout in a wheelchair as our example for exercises. You can do these even if you're not in the mood to go to the gym!

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Start Position



End Position

SHRUGS | Let's start with shrugs for our trapezius muscles. You can use hand weights if you have them; if not, you can find something around the house to hold in your hands. Without bending your elbows, simply lift your shoulders to touch your ears. Stop at the top and hold at the bottom without using any momentum.



Start Position



End Position

TRICEPS | Next, let's try our hand at a triceps extension by holding one object up in the air. Place your other hand as shown in the picture to help steady your arm. Now bend your elbow, stop and then push the weight back up and stop.



Start Position



End Position

CHEST AND BACK | For this exercise, hold a dumbbell or object of similar size and weight in your hands. Hold it at eye level with each hand on either side of the object. Push it away from you and stop, then bring it back to you and stop. This works your chest and your back, and if you sit up without pressing your back against your wheelchair, it also works your abdominal muscles.



Start Position



End Position

BICEPS | This final exercise consists of biceps curls with weights in one or both hands – the choice is yours. With your palms up and wrists tucked in, curl the weight(s) up three-fourths of the way and stop, as shown, then lower back down very slowly and stop.

All exercises should consist of 10-12 repetitions with two to three sets – more than three sets are unnecessary. Safety is always the first priority – be sure to breathe in and out and avoid holding your breath while exercising. Keep your tummy tight to help protect your back; it also works your abdominal muscles!

There are many more exercises that can be done in a wheelchair – be sure to check back for more suggestions. 🔄



Photos provided by Cindy Asch-Martin