

Degree

presents

MOVING TOWARDS INCLUSION

A Guide to Building a More
Inclusive Fitness Industry

Created in collaboration with





PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

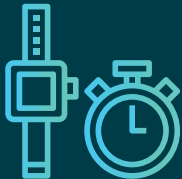
Regular physical activity

provides many health benefits to all individuals including those with chronic health conditions regardless of disability status.

The benefits from physical activity are not exclusive to just aerobic and anaerobic capacity. Regular physical activity can have a positive impact on depression, anxiety, and ADHD, stress relief, memory function, and self-esteem.

Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans recommends **150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity a week and at least 2 days a week of muscle-strengthening activities.**

Unfortunately, many people with disabilities do not achieve these recommendations due to barriers to access fitness programs, facilities, and equipment. Moreover, negative societal perceptions and lack of knowledge about the needs and abilities of the disabled population further reduce access to quality physical activity and fitness programs. The fitness industry has an opportunity to create a cultural shift that includes people with disabilities in their programs and spaces.



THIS TOOLKIT

provides inclusive strategies that fitness practitioners can incorporate within their spaces to ensure that everyone has access to physical activity and equal opportunities to achieve optimal health.



INTRODUCTION

One in four people in the U.S. has a disability.

People with disabilities have a right to access healthy opportunities within their community, including fitness spaces. These opportunities include **an accessible physical environment, programmatic inclusion like group fitness classes, access to adapted equipment, and Staff trained in inclusive fitness who recognize the importance of health and wellness for all people.** Barriers for people with a disability in public fitness facilities are slowly being removed, but there is still work to do. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), fitness centers must provide equal access to their facility for people with disabilities.

This includes accessible parking, entrances, restrooms, paths of travel, signage, and more. However, the ADA only covers basic law, but a more inclusive concept is known as **Universal Design.**

Universal Design considers how products, and the environment can be used to the greatest extent by everyone, regardless of ability.

In a fitness space, this can include exercise equipment, programs, and policies that promote equal access and use by all members and staff. Additionally, anti-discrimination laws prohibit organizations from denying membership or services based on disability. **To build a truly inclusive environment, policies and practices must address the built environment, access routes, equipment, accessibility Information Communication Technology (ICT), programming, staff, and trainers.**



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INCLUSION IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The most fundamental requirement for a person with a disability to engage in regular physical activity **is access**.

Access refers to the ability to use the built environment like fitness centers, playgrounds, parks, trails, etc. Individuals with disabilities often face several obstacles to using certain parts of a facility with the most common access barriers involving physical access like doorways and entrances, parking, facilities, locker rooms, bathrooms, and exercise equipment. Other potential barriers to access could include the lack of ramps, signage, clear paths/sidewalks, hard floor surfaces, curb cuts, accessible parking, automatic doors, park play equipment, adequate temperature, and lighting just to name a few.

Environmental checklists developed by the National Center on Health Physical Activity & Disability (NCHPAD) identify areas where accessibility can be improved. It is important to conduct accessibility reviews and surveys **in partnership with people with disabilities or disability organizations from your community**. This can be done by partnering with a local disability organization such as a Center for Independent Living. The following tools and checklists can help you get started with environmental access in your fitness space.



The following tools and checklists are great resources for creating a more accessible fitness space.

- [Community Health Inclusion Index](#)
- [AIMFREE](#)
- [ADA Checklist](#)
- [Removing Barriers in Fitness Spaces](#)
- [The United States Access Board Guide to Accessible Routes](#)
- [ADA Checklist for Exercise Equipment](#)
- [ADA Checklist for swimming pools](#)
- [How to Choose a Fitness Center](#)
- [How to Connect and Engage with Disability Advocates and Communities](#)
- [Accessibility and Inclusion Toolkit for YMCAs and Fitness Facilities](#)



INCLUSIVE EQUIPMENT

In a fitness center,

at least one of each type of equipment must be placed along an accessible route so it can be accessed by someone who uses a wheelchair, walker, or just needs a little extra space to move around. Most fitness facilities have rows of treadmills, exercise bikes, and other cardiovascular exercise equipment grouped, usually very close together. Many people with disabilities can use much of this equipment, but given the space restriction between pieces of equipment, access is often difficult, if not impossible.

Although it is ideal to have 36 inches of clear floor space between each piece of equipment, this may not be possible. Often the simplest strategy is to locate one of each type of equipment at the end of a row along the accessible route. A rule of thumb is to plan a circle 60 inches in diameter beside the exercise equipment with the circle overlapping the accessible route. Swing-away, fold-up, or removable seats in combination with clear floor space allow many people using wheelchairs to use the equipment. Even when the seat of a piece of equipment cannot be removed or adjusted, providing clear floor space next to the equipment allows many people using mobility devices to transfer onto the seat and use the equipment.

There are many low-cost equipment options such as cuffs, straps, and clips, that enable more individuals to use existing equipment. To increase gripping ability, cuffs, mitts, and splints can be used by people with weak hands or little grip strength. These can be used with free weights, lat pull machines, pulleys, or anything that requires gripping a bar or handle. To stabilize limbs or feet, straps or clips can be used to secure a person's foot to the pedal of an exercise bike.

For a person with limited use of specific limbs, straps with Velcro can hold the limb(s) stationary. For extra balance, an adjustable strap can be placed around the torso of a person and secured to a piece of the exercise equipment to provide stability. Weight belts can be used for balance. For extra padding, dense foam or towels can be cut into pieces and placed where needed to prevent rubbing and unwanted pressure.

For individuals with visual impairments include tactile marking or Braille instructions on all pieces of equipment. For safety, provide color contrast to indicate unique spaces to help orientate individuals to where they are. Select cardio equipment which allows speech output for individuals with a visual impairment whenever possible.

Inclusive Exercise Equipment Features include:

- Swing away seats
- Small weight increments
- Wider seats and benches
- Multi-station cable systems – offer a wide range of resistance activities in a small space
- Different types of free weights – including less than 5 pounds, and cuff weights for limited grip
- Raised mats for stretching
- Exercise bikes offer a great deal of variety with low impact – recumbent style, Krank cycles, upper arm ergometers
- Equipment that moves both arms and legs at the same time such as Nu-Step® or other recumbent steppers
- Treadmills with low miles per hour settings and low profiles

The following resources provide information on using and adapting fitness equipment:

[Discover Accessible Fitness](#)

[Inclusive Fitness Tips](#)

[1 FIT Tips](#)

[Before and After a Fitness](#)

[Center Makeover](#)



INCLUSION IN SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

People with disabilities need to be able to fully participate in the activities to which they have access. Having access to a facility (e.g., swimming pool, weight training room, spin class, etc.) is necessary but often insufficient for a satisfactory and health-enhancing experience without full participation. Users must have the ability to properly position themselves on the equipment and equipment, be offered programming written in plain language or using simple steps, be given clear verbal descriptions, and be offered accommodations. Information on the accessibility of facilities, services, programs, and equipment should also be provided in an accessible format (e.g., audio or braille for people who are blind, pictures for people with intellectual disabilities, etc.). It is important to be flexible with program adaptations but always maintain the original goal and intent of the activity or program once adapted. In essence, an adaptation should not fundamentally alter the design of the program or activity but instead modify it so that someone with a disability can

participate. Examples include nutrition handouts with large print or pictograms, exercises that can be done from a seated and standing position, sign language interpretation for a health education class, and recumbent or handcycles for a cycling activity.

People with disabilities have had a long history of being excluded from planning programs and services, so it is important to always seek input from people with disabilities in the program design, implementation, and evaluation. Often, the specific needs of people with disabilities may not be known to the program planners, so having experts with disabilities consult on program design will help ensure that inclusion components are described, understood, championed, and accounted for, in addition to making the program more marketable and credible.



Here are 10 Ways to Create an Inclusive Fitness Experience:

- Regularly assess how access barriers can be removed and inclusive features incorporated into all areas of the facility. Have a sliding scale fee or offer scholarships especially if the entire facility is not accessible.
- Offer trial visits, week passes, and introductory classes for those with a disability.
- Offer a wide variety of equipment, programs, and classes for all levels.
- Provide more than one type of equipment option for cardio, strength and other activities and make sure they provide tactile markings.
- Purchase or replace exercise equipment with equipment that offers more features to make it usable for those with varying degrees of ability.
- Hire disabled fitness professionals!
- Hire Certified Inclusive Fitness Trainers (ACSM-NCHPAD CIFT) and train all staff on disability education, modification of exercises, and how to use and communicate about inclusive features on exercise equipment.
- Demonstrate diversity – in hiring, marketing, and communications.
- Treat people with disabilities as you would any other member, using an individualized approach.

DISABILITY EDUCATION 101

The following tips relate to how we think about disability and interact with others.



Always use person-first or identity-first language. While person-first language is widely accepted, identity-first language is also acceptable and empowering.



When referring to someone without disability, it is appropriate to use the term non-disabled. Avoid the term able-bodied.



There are a wide range of physical, sensory and intellectual disabilities, associated causes, and levels of function. Consider each unique situation and remember that disability is diverse.



Do not assume that a person with a disability is unhappy or has the desire to be "cured."



Try not to give undue praise for everyday situations and accomplishments simply because an individual has a disability. Limit these types of praises and compliments to individuals with disability who truly accomplish motivating or heroic achievements.



A disability is not a negative characteristic and should not be portrayed as such.



An individual who uses a wheelchair may have any varying degree of mobility but is never "bound" or "confined" to a wheelchair.



Apply the same principles, considerations, and respect to everyone.



Provide an interpreter, and write all materials in plain language.



Speak directly to the individual, not the person's caretaker or interpreter.



Some disabilities might not be visible. Invisible disabilities can include brain injuries, chronic pain, mental illness, gastro-intestinal disorders, and much more. Often these disabilities can be overlooked and misunderstood.

For more information on Disability Education, refer to the following resources and trainings:

[Disability Education](#)

[Disability Education eLearning](#)

[What We Say Matters!](#)



TIPS

When working with a person with a physical disability:

- Never use a person's disability to improve another individual's perspective on life.
- Make sure your workout site is accessible.
- Ask ahead of time if the individual will need any accommodations.
- Speak to the individual the same way you would speak to someone without a disability.
- No need to crouch or kneel to the level of the individual if your interaction will be brief.
- Get to know your client's level of function. A chair user might be able and prefer to stand or transfer out of the wheelchair to perform an exercise.
- Offer a variety of choices whenever appropriate during exercise without over adapting or changing the objective or outcome of the activity.

When working with a person with an intellectual disability

- Keep the workout space small and preferably well known to the individuals. For example, a workout done in a large gym may be overwhelming or distracting.
- Keep a visible schedule of the daily activities. Individuals with intellectual disabilities can benefit from access to clear and concise directions or instructions while performing a task.
- It may help to conduct the sessions in the participant's preferred location.
- Ask one question at a time. Explain and break down the new activities in simple steps. Ensure understanding of the instructions given by asking the individual to explain the task at hand. Yes or no answers are not efficient when assessing comprehension.

When working with someone with a sensory disability

- Always verbally introduce and excuse yourself when you join or leave a conversation with an individual who is visually impaired.
- If an individual has difficulty speaking, do not assume the presence of an intellectual disability or alter your speech or attitude.
- Allow sufficient time for communication, do not attempt to finish sentences, and refrain from giving cue words during a conversation.
- If a person has hearing loss, consider writing your message or having an interpreter, most individuals do not read lips.

INCLUSION IN COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH

It is very important to target your outreach efforts to individuals with disabilities to ensure that they are **aware** and **invited** to your program.

Marketing and outreach materials should always show the inclusion of people with disabilities in either **language, visuals, or both**. When people see examples of people like them, they are more likely to take part in the program or activity and you are conveying a message that fitness is for everyone. In addition to showing disability, ensure that your marketing and outreach materials are available in a variety of accessible formats, **plain language**, and **translated to other languages** based on the community in which you are working.

Your print materials should follow **accessibility guidelines** as well for issues such as color contrast, font size, and type. If you are using websites and social media, advertise events, or provide registration for a program, make sure that your website is accessible. Lastly, once materials are made, your inclusive outreach efforts should be **targeted to people with disability**. You can work with disability organizations in your community to help spread the word about your inclusive fitness program or center.

[Web Accessibility](#)

[Inclusive Communication](#)





RECRUITING AND HIRING INDIVIDUALS WITH A DISABILITY

Title I of the ADA protects qualified individuals with disabilities from employment discrimination. Companies that support best practices for employing and supporting people with a disability benefit from a wider pool of talent, skills, and creative business solutions. Disabled employees bring varied perspectives and skills to the job including creativity, innovation, problem-solving skills, and commitment. They are also proven to have a lower turnover and higher retention rate. All these traits can directly affect your bottom line. People with a disability are your greatest resource, so why not fill your fitness center with the experts.

4 inclusive hiring tips

01

ENSURE ACCESSIBILITY.

Within your space, online presence, and prepare your staff with disability education and ways to identify discrimination issues.

02

CHOOSE YOUR LANGUAGE WITH PURPOSE.

Review the language in your job descriptions and advertisements to make sure you are attracting the people you intend to hire. Expand your recruiting to post open jobs where people with a disability can find them. Seek out organizations, websites, social media pages and blogs that are already targeting people with a disability to place your job ads.

03

MAKE YOUR APPLICATION PROCESS INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE.

All job postings, programs and services should be universally available on websites and other technology platforms. Accessible Information Communication Technology (ICT) is as imperative as an accessible facility.

04

INTERVIEW CANDIDATES EQUALLY.

Conduct interviews in the least restrictive environment



For more information on inclusive hiring practices, check out these resources and organizations:

[A Guide on Appropriate Disability Terminology for Journalists and Media](#)