

SPORT ON FOUR WHEELS RATHER THAN TWO LEGS: A GUIDE TO STAYING FIT AS A WHEELCHAIR USER



Trusted Solutions, Passionate People



Index

Introduction	3
Motivation	4
The benefits	4
Accessible Gym Equipment	5
Tips and Advice	6
Wheelchair Basketball	7
Wheelchair Yoga	9
Wheelchair Dancing	11
Conclusion	12



Introduction

Let's face it, not all of us like going to the gym and we're not all 'sporty'. Nevertheless, **it is vital that those of us in wheelchairs stay fit and healthy in order to get the most out of our bodies and what they can do.** With a healthy body, we are less prone to illness and disease and more likely to live longer with fewer aches and pains. And let's be honest, it's always good when our clothes fit nicely, too! With fad diets and a constant bombardment of eating plans, it is difficult to know exactly where to start with getting fit and healthy. **This ebook will hopefully help you to decide what form of exercise suits you and your wheelchair best.**

In this ebook, we are going to introduce three activities that can be enjoyed from a wheelchair – wheelchair basketball, wheelchair yoga and wheelchair dancing, as well as the gym equipment you should be looking out for, if that's your thing. They are all totally different but equally enjoyable and challenging. Hopefully, there will be something for everyone to try after reading this.



Motivation



There are many benefits to taking exercise and staying healthy, but, especially with a disability, it can be tough to know where to start and how much the body can take before more damage than good is being done to it. More than this, it can also be a huge challenge to get motivated to exercise, especially if you have not done much of it before. Try to think of the positive aspects and the benefits to be enjoyed by exercising – it can also help if you set yourself goals to achieve and milestones to hit, then maybe you could reward yourself with a weekend away or a night out with friends. It can also be useful to exercise with a ‘buddy’, who will encourage you on down days and watch you develop and see your fitness results. **Set aside a few hours in a day for exercising and try to keep the routine around the same time.** Group sports like wheelchair basketball and football also offer an excellent chance for some competitive fun, but more on this later.

The benefits

Exercise becomes so much more attractive when you are aware of the benefits getting active has on your body, but also your mind. Here are just some ways that exercise can help you if you are a wheelchair user:

- ▶ **Toning muscles**
- ▶ **Keeps weight in check** (you may even lose some!)
- ▶ Helps to **maintain the fitness** you already have
- ▶ It increases your **flexibility, mobility, body awareness, and muscle strength.**
- ▶ **Exercise makes us happy!** It is a way of reducing anxiety and stress
- ▶ **Self esteem and confidence** can also shoot up
- ▶ It helps to **improve blood circulation, spine stability, and posture.**



Accessible Gym Equipment

For those of you who are disabled gym bunnies, there are certain pieces of equipment that might help you fly towards your goals as a wheelchair user in the gym. Here, we will introduce several of them:

- 1. The Hand Cycle** – great for a warm up to loosen your shoulder joints, most hand cycles have removeable seats so you can simply take the seat off and wheel into position. Get your heart rate going by hand cycling as fast as you can for 30 seconds, then slowing down for 30 seconds and repeating for 5 minutes.
- 2. Dumbbells** – training for something specific? Add resistance by using dumbbells to your routine. The more resistance you need, the higher you go.
- 3. Medicine Balls** – a great way to train by bouncing the ball against a wall quickly or pushing fast with the ball underneath your chair (you might need to fasten it into a bag), these heavy balls help to quickly strengthen the core and work on coordination.
- 4. Pushing Gloves** – are you wanting to improve your fitness by pushing quickly to increase your strength in cardio? Get your hands on some pushing gloves, and your time will knock off as your grip improves. Gripping gloves are also available for those who have limited hand dexterity but still want to grab bars and/or dumbbells.
- 5. Equipment with backrests** – Be they rowing machines or exercise bikes, many pieces of gym equipment are now available with backrests, meaning that if you struggling to support your back but can still get some movement out of your legs, these machines are now accessible to you. Any good gym will have at least one of each machine with an optional backrest. Enjoy feeling the burn whilst knowing that the back support is there when a rest is needed!



Thought gyms and gym equipment weren't accessible? Think again! **If there is ever anything you are unsure of before using gym equipment, please talk to one of the personal trainers;** they are on hand to help and ensure that you don't damage yourself in a bid to get fit and healthy! Now wouldn't that be counter-productive?!

Tips and Advice

Still need more persuading to get active? Here are some tips and hints for exercising in a wheelchair, with thanks to NHS Choices:

- ▶ **Regular aerobic exercise** – the kind that raises your heart rate and causes you to break a sweat – and muscle-strengthening exercise are just as important for the health and wellbeing of wheelchair users as they are for other adults.
- ▶ Whatever your preferences and level of physical ability, there will be an **activity or sport for you**.
- ▶ **Physical activity doesn't have to mean the gym or competitive sport**, though these can be great options. Activity can take many forms and happen in many places.
- ▶ To improve your health, try to choose activities that **improve your heart health and muscle strength**.

For general health, all adults aged 19 to 64, including wheelchair users, are advised to do:

- ▶ at least **150 minutes a week of aerobic activity**, plus
- ▶ **strength exercises on two or more days a week**.

Don't worry about hitting these targets straight away: it's more important to do something active that you enjoy.

So, now some tips and tricks have been discussed, let's start with the first of our three wheelchair activities: wheelchair basketball.



Wheelchair Basketball

Arguably one of the most well known wheelchair sports, **wheelchair basketball fills stadiums and arenas and gets some of the loudest cheers at the Paralympic Games.** It is played all over Europe, and local clubs are easy to find with an internet search. But how is it really played? The International Paralympic Committee tell all:

Rules

Played by two teams of five, the rules of the game are broadly similar to those of Olympic Basketball, with the same size court and basket height.

A team has 24 seconds from taking possession of the ball to complete its attempt on the basket. One point is scored for a successful free-throw, two for a normal field basket and three for a shot made from behind the arc of the three-point line.

Players move the ball around the court by passing or dribbling. A dribble is when a player bounces the ball and pushes the chair simultaneously or, places the ball on their lap and takes up to two pushes of the chair, bounces the ball, and then places the ball back on their lap.

Players are required to throw or bounce the ball after every two pushes of the wheels on their chairs to avoid being penalised for 'travelling'.

Twelve teams compete in group stages in the men's competition and 10 teams in the women's, with the top teams qualifying for the knock-out rounds. Matches consist of four quarters of 10 minutes each. A player who commits five personal fouls must be replaced in the game by another player.

Classification

The Wheelchair Basketball competition at the Paralympic Games is played in wheelchairs and is open to athletes with a permanent physical impairment in the lower limb(s) which can be objectively verified. Impairments



may include paraplegia, lower limb amputations, cerebral palsy, and polio. Not all players are daily wheelchair users, so athletes can be ambulant.

Wheelchair Basketball classification is based on the players' functional capacity to complete the skills necessary to play - pushing, pivoting, shooting, rebounding, dribbling, passing and catching.

Players are classified by a points system from 1 to 4.5 - with higher classification numbers representing those with the least physical impairment such as a lower limb permanent injury.

Each squad can consist of up to 12 players, with only five players on the court at any one time. During a match a team must field five players whose cumulative classification does not exceed 14.0 points.

A personal experience

This is what blogger and motivational speaker with cerebral palsy, **Jamey Breen** has to say about his love for wheelchair basketball. You can read his full account [here](#).

'Personally, basketball brings me happiness. I know that when the game starts - whether I'm playing or coaching - nothing else seems to matter. It also brings disappointment, more so when I'm coaching rather than playing. As a coach, there is only so much you can do to affect the outcome of the game. When you see your team lose, your heart still sinks inside your chest.

I guess it's just all a part of the love affair I have with the game. You have to take the good with the bad and try to do the best you can. Leave it all out there on the court.

The game gives me a competitive outlet to express my fire. My internal desire, an unrelenting competitive attitude. A fusion of endless enthusiasm and a deep-rooted anger. Sounds bad, right? It's not.

It gives me a way to take everything that is bothering me in my life and put it towards something meaningful. It makes me a great competitor- my ability to focus my aggression and throw myself into the fire.'

Think wheelchair basketball might be for you? Visit the International [Wheelchair Basketball Federation](#) for information about European clubs, leagues and competitions. We also recommend you to use a specific basketball wing on you. This specific wing will protect your feet and leg!



Wheelchair Yoga

Keeping fit with exercise is not always as high as it should be on many people's list of priorities, and it can be even tougher to keep toned if you have a disability, especially if you struggle to move quickly and often in a state that will get your heart pumping and make you breathless. **But now there are ways to strengthen your core, improve your posture and solidify a calm state of mind, all whilst sitting down.** Let us introduce you to wheelchair yoga.

Yoga reigns from India, and aims for each individual to express their unique selves via certain moves, or 'poses'. In this way, then, it's important for anyone taking up a new yoga routine to be comfortable with themselves and the expressions of their bodies. Great at one pose but not quite managing another? No worries, it's all about managing to stretch and strengthen in a way that you feel comfortable with, and in a way that strengthens your mind, too.

So why should you do it?

Like with most exercise, the benefits of wheelchair yoga really are surprised.

As you probably expected, your flexibility is likely to improve and you may well become stronger pretty quickly, but also expect benefits of a better sleep, less stress and anxiety in your everyday life, and a clearer mental connection with what is going on around you.

Who wouldn't want any of these things in our fast and busy lives?



Steps to take to ensure the best experience

Whilst there are so many benefits, it is also possible to experience pain whilst performing wheelchair yoga. Follow these steps to ensure it's only the positives you hold onto:

- ▶ **Chat through your idea with your GP first.** They will best be able to advise which exercises will suit you and your abilities.
- ▶ **Perform wheelchair yoga with a friend, relative or partner.** Exercise is always more fun and motivating when it is done with someone else, and you have help there should you need it.
- ▶ **When stretching, you should only feel a small 'pull' in your muscles.** If it's hurting, you are pushing yourself too far or haven't got the pose quite right. Stop and start over.
- ▶ **Relax and breathe.** Focus on your body and mind throughout any wheelchair yoga session – the point is to be more in tune with yourself (and not your facebook or emails, always turn your phone off!)

Top Three Wheelchair Yoga Poses

These excellent wheelchair yoga poses will hopefully have you feeling connected and strengthened in no time, each one working a different part of your body. Thanks to www.mayallbehappy.org for their wisdom.

Cat Pose

1. Grip your chair or place your hands on your thighs
2. Exhale as you round your upper body forward, dropping your chin toward your chest, arching your spine like a cat
3. Hold in this position for a few deep breaths

Eagle Pose

1. Inhale and lift your arms
2. Exhale and cross your arms at the elbows so your hands are back-to-back
3. Hold in this position as you continue to breathe for 20-30 seconds

Hip Stretch

1. Inhale, lift one leg and cross it over the other
2. If you want a deeper stretch and you have good trunk stability, exhale and lean forward from your hips
3. Continue to breathe as you hold the stretch for 3-5 breaths
4. Gently release your leg and move to stretch the other side

There are plenty of other exercises to try. Sitting down has never been so stress-free!

A personal experience

There's even an accessible yoga blog that can be found [here](#). Alongside other ambassadors, it promotes Katja Sandschneider, from Germany:

'Katja Sandschneider is a 33 year old accessible yoga teacher from Germany and has been part of the AY network since the very beginning. After an internal bleeding in her spinal cord shortly after her birth, she's



been living with a right-sided hemiparesis from her hip down. After her first yoga class five years ago, she was stunned by the effects the practice had on her: not only her back pain and headaches got a lot better, she also felt emotionally calm and relaxed. She was amazed that she could follow normal yoga classes by adapting the poses for her individual needs. At the same time, it took her by surprise that accessible yoga didn't really exist in Germany yet. Therefore, Katja decided to become a yoga teacher to other people with disabilities and took Jivana Heyman's Accessible Yoga Teacher Training in Austria in 2013. She's been teaching accessible yoga classes in Berlin since 2014. For more information visit her [website](#)

Think wheelchair yoga might be for you? Search 'accessible yoga' now - you'll be surprised by what you find!

Wheelchair Dancing

Let's face it, not all of us enjoy breaking too much of a sweat, but most of us like to move and express ourselves in some way. Behold, Wheelchair Dancing – this might be the answer to all of your exercise worries!

So, how does it work? Over to those Paralympic guys again!

Wheelchair dancing is an extremely elegant, graceful and stylish sport which involves athletes with a physical impairment that affects the lower limbs.

Participants can compete combi style, dancing with an able bodied (standing) partner, or duo dance for two wheelchair users together. Group dance involves



wheelchair users only or together with able-bodied partners whereas single dance sees a wheelchair user dance alone.

Standard dances include waltz, tango, Viennese waltz, slow foxtrot and quickstep, and Latin American dances include the samba, cha-cha-cha, rumba, paso doble and jive.

Freestyle/ showdance can include the standard dances (conventional) or any style for presentation (folk, hip hop, latin, standard, ballet, contemporary, street dance, salsa, Argentinean tango, cumbia, belly dance, etc.).

There are also Formation dances for four, six or eight couples dancing in formation.

A personal experience

One of the best Wheelchair Dance classes we have found is in Manchester, UK. You can visit their website [here](#). Of Wheelchair Dancing, the group states:

'Dance possesses a magical, transcendent quality that moves us all, without regard for language, culture, station in life or limitations. It can add wonder to the most common event, and excitement to an ordinary evening. But most of all, it can touch those who are considered unreachable.'

Wheelchair Dancing (especially ballroom dancing) may be right up your street if you have a partner who is either non-disabled or also a wheelchair user. For those of us with disabilities, it can often prove pretty tricky to get active with our partners and find something that we can both do, are good at and will enjoy. Wheelchair dancing can be taken at the couple's one pace, and there is equal elegance from both sides! It is an opportunity to get physically close, whilst having a giggle and meeting other people in the same, or similar, situations. A good middle ground between an individual and a group sport, and a chilled or exhausting activity, wheelchair dancing might just be the sport for you. Visit <http://wdsauk.co.uk/> for more information.

Conclusion

There are now so many sports and activities available for wheelchair users, from football and basketball to aerobics and ballroom dancing. Gym equipment is constantly improving and updating, and there are now handcycle machines and equipments with backrests for those who struggle to use their legs and/or cannot sit upright without support. There's also a great feeling of satisfaction in playing a team game, and benefitting from the social aspects of disability sport, as well as the physical ones. For those in wheelchairs who have had an accident and used to be sporty, it's great to know that they are still able to play the sports they love. What's better than the feeling of winning at a national or international

competition?! The sky really is the limit. **So keep fit, stay healthy, but most importantly, have fun!** Hopefully these tips, tricks and accounts from other disabled people who are enjoying sports and activities you wouldn't necessarily expect to be suitable for wheelchair users have inspired you to grab some exercise for yourself. Go for it!

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