

Exercises for Chronic Pain

Many research studies show aerobic and strengthening exercises can lessen chronic pain and improve a person's ability to do daily activities.

What is Exercise?

It is any activity that requires physical effort. It is often used to improve health, fitness, and chronic pain. Types of exercises are:

- Aerobic
- Strengthening
- Stretching

Aerobic exercise

This is a moderate intensity physical activity that raises your heart rate and breathing rate. It will help you be more active for a longer amount of time and lessen pain. It can also help:

- Heart health
- Mental health
- Overall health

Do more physical activity by doing things like taking the stairs, parking a bit farther away from the store, walking instead of taking a ride, and doing lawn or house work. These things, as well as other fun activities like canoeing and tennis, are types of aerobic exercise.

Strengthening exercises

Doing strengthening exercises will help you do daily tasks and activities you enjoy with less effort. They help you build more muscle strength and endurance, and lessen your pain.

Stretching exercises

Stretching helps your mobility, joint movement, and pain.

How does exercise lessen pain?

Research shows that exercise lessens pain in many ways, such as:

- **Brain:** Releases natural analgesics in your spinal cord and brain to turn off pain signals. These analgesics have no risks or side effects.
- **Muscle:** Exercising muscles release chemicals that block pain signals from being sent to your brain.
- **Immune System:** Immune cells release natural chemicals that block pain signals and heal injured tissue.

What are other benefits of exercise for people with chronic pain?

Research also shows that exercise can improve:

- Fatigue (feeling very tired)
- Energy
- Strength
- Mental health
- Physical function
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Sleep
- Body weight
- Blood pressure
- Blood glucose levels
- Quality of life

More importantly, exercise can help you do activities you enjoy like spending time with family and friends, working in the garden or yard, or sports.

When and how much should I exercise?

You have been prescribed aerobic, strengthening, and stretching exercises. They are designed to give you strength and energy so you can do more activities you enjoy. Choose a time of day that best fits your schedule.

It is helpful to record your exercises to make sure you are meeting your weekly goals and for tracking your progress. You can record your exercise on:

- The weekly exercise tracker on the last page of this handout
- Electronic devices, such as Fitbit and Garmin pedometers and the iWatch
- A downloadable app, such as Nike+Fuel, MyFitnessPal, and iPhone Health

All of the above choices track the number of steps you take each day, distance covered, heart rate, and calories eaten and burned. This information can help with motivation and give you feedback about your exercise sessions.

It is most important to be more active than you are right now. For aerobic exercise, start with as little as 5 to 10 minutes each day. Add to that time with a goal of reaching 30 minutes or more each day. It is best to do moderate intensity exercise for the best results. **Moderate intensity exercise is rated between 3 and 6 on a 0 to 10 scale (see chart below). You should be able to talk while exercising, but not sing.**

Sedentary	Light	Moderate	Vigorous
0	1 2	3 4 5 6	7 8 9 10
No effort, not moving	Little effort, can talk and sing	Moderate effort with a noticeable rise in heart rate, can talk but not sing	Maximum effort with substantial rise in heart rate, not able to talk

For strengthening exercises, start with as little as 1 set of repetitions with the goal of reaching 3 sets. Hold stretching exercises for 30 seconds and repeat them 3 times. You will get instructions specific to your chronic pain condition.

Tips for starting a successful exercise program

People often feel anxious about starting and continuing an exercise program. You may be afraid it will cause more pain and be uncomfortable. You might be concerned you do not have enough time. You might worry that you do not know how to exercise the right way or that you cannot meet your goals. You also might think it will not help your chronic pain. We understand this. This is normal. In fact, most people who exercise regularly feel or think this way at one time or another. Think about these concerns and come up with ways you can exercise regularly.

Before starting try:

1. Making of list of activities you would like to do or could do better if you were stronger and fit.
2. Making a list of things that might get in the way of you doing your exercise. Come up with ways you can keep exercising if these happen.
3. Writing down your goals. How could exercise help you reach your goals?
4. Telling someone when you start your exercise routine. It can help you stick to it. Who could you tell?
5. Exercising in a group or with another person. Is there a group exercise class you would like to try? Is there a person who would exercise with you?

Should I warm up and cool down when I exercise?

Yes. Spend 2 to 3 minutes warming-up at a light activity level before you exercise. Cool down for 2 to 3 minutes when you are done.

What if my pain gets worse with exercise?

Pain with exercise is normal. You may have some muscle soreness when you start an exercise routine. Your pain may get worse while you are exercising, especially when you first start a program. This is not a warning sign that you are causing injury. You will not make your chronic pain condition worse by exercising. Your pain will start to get better with regular exercise, and you will be able to do more activities that you enjoy.

If pain is stopping you from finishing your exercise routine, lower the intensity (how hard you are working). If your pain is worse for more than 2 hours after you finish exercising, lower the intensity or amount of time you exercise at the next session.

Remember, pain with exercise is normal for some people with chronic pain, and is not a warning sign that you are causing injury. Regular exercise will lessen your pain. It is very hard to make chronic pain better without exercise.

When should I ask for help?

Talk with your care provider if you have any of the following during or after you exercise:

- Nausea and vomiting (throwing up)
- Are not able to catch your breath
- Chest pain
- Lightheadedness, dizziness or feeling faint
- A new pain or injury

Frequently Asked Questions

Why should I exercise?

All people benefit from movement and exercise. It is needed for good health. People with a chronic pain condition need exercise and activity to send their body and brain signals needed to adapt and get better. Regular exercise helps your body become stronger so you can do more activities you enjoy. It also helps manage and improve your:

- Chronic pain condition
- Quality of life
- Body weight
- Blood pressure
- Mood
- Fatigue (tiredness)
- Sleep

Exercise can help you stay engaged with your family and community; so you have a happier, healthier, and more productive life.

What is the best exercise for chronic pain?

There is no single best exercise that works for all people. Find one or a few you really enjoy. Group classes can be fun, such as yoga, tai chi, walking clubs, or dance classes.

The most important thing to do is to stay active and keep moving! Choose something you enjoy. Switch things up if you start to notice lack of interest.

I have not exercised in many years, where should I start?

Exercising does not need to be exhausting to be of benefit. If walking is an option for you, it is a wonderful way to start. Stretching and strengthening exercises are also great starting points.

Many people need to work slowly toward exercise goals. The important thing is not what you do, but rather that you stay active. The good news is you will see improvements quickly with even small amounts of exercise.

Is exercise safe?

Yes. Most people find a safe and effective exercise program to meet their health goals and preferences. Not being active is much more dangerous to your health than being active.

Should I exercise if I am sick?

If you have a cold or flu it is best to take a day off.

Can medicines affect my ability to exercise?

Yes. Side effects of some medicines may cause dizziness, lower blood sugar, or change your heart rate. Ask your pharmacist or care provider about side effects that may affect your exercise routine.

What are some warning signs I should look for while exercising?

Talk with your care provider if you have any of the below signs during or after exercise:

- Nausea and vomiting
- Not able to catch your breath
- Chest pain
- Lightheadedness
- Dizziness
- Feeling faint
- A new pain or injury

Am I too old to exercise?

No. Exercise is good for people of all ages.

Do I need special clothing or equipment?

No. Wear clothes and shoes that are comfortable and safe. You do not need special equipment either. Add to your strength training by using weights with your activities. Use elastic bands, cans of soup, or water jugs as weights instead of buying special equipment.

When should I add weights to a strengthening exercise?

Your body is amazingly adaptable. Set goals that you are confident of reaching and when you do, set new goals. Work slowly and continually. If you keep giving your body new challenges it will keep adapting. When you are doing strength training, one way to challenge to your body is to lift more weight.

Tips for increasing intensity:

- When you finish the repetitions without a weight, add weights to your program.
- When you add more weight you might need to do fewer repetitions.
- Slowly do more repetitions with the weight until you can do 3 sets of 10 reps.

What if I feel I can do more than 30 minutes of aerobic exercise?

There is no set limit on the amount of exercise you do. Set goals that you are able to reach. Add to the number of minutes slowly at each session. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends 30 minutes of exercise 5 days a week for a total of 150 minutes each week to see health benefits. People with chronic pain will see benefits with less than 150 minutes of activity each week.

Should I go to an exercise class or fitness center?

Exercise can be done anywhere, at home, a fitness center, a park, or a neighborhood. Going to a class or fitness center may help you keep a schedule and make exercising more fun. If you go to a fitness center or a class, work at a pace that is best for you.

Will my health insurance help cover the cost of an exercise class?

Some insurance companies and employers offer benefits for health and wellness, especially if a doctor orders it. It is best for you to call your insurance company to learn more about your benefits.

How long before aerobic exercise should I eat?

Some people need to wait after eating before exercising, while others do not. You will need to find out what works best for you.

Do I have to do my aerobic exercise all at one time?

When doing aerobic exercise, you may break it up into as many sessions as needed throughout the day. The CDC recommends 30 minutes of exercise 5 days a week for a total of 150 minutes each week to see health benefits. People with chronic pain often see benefits with less than 150 minutes of activity each week. It is best to stay active and keep moving.

What is the best time of day to exercise?

Choose a time of day that best fits your daily routine. Some people find it harder to go to sleep after they exercise and need to do it earlier in the day, but others do not. You will need to find out what works best for you.

How do I change my exercise program on a day when I have more pain?

Exercising on a day when you have more pain may help lessen your pain. Remember, exercise will not make your condition worse. Try to exercise for at least 5 minutes to get started and you may be able to keep going. You can also do a longer warm-up to help get yourself moving and slowly work up to a moderate intensity exercise. The most important thing is to stay active and keep moving.

Weekly Exercise Tracker

Use this to record your exercise. Follow the exercise instructions your provider gives you.

Name: _____ Week of: _____

Activity Type	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Aerobic Exercise							
Strengthening							
Stretching							