

Physical activity and chronic pain

HOW DOES PHYSICAL ACTIVITY HELP IF YOU HAVE CHRONIC PAIN?

- A programme of physical activity combined with relaxation can significantly improve both pain and the ability to do everyday tasks.
- Physical activity can preserve or even restore the range of movement at the affected joints.
- People suffering from chronic pain often make changes to their posture and movement patterns in an attempt to avoid pain, and this can lead to further problems. Physical activity helps to prevent or limit those changes.
- Physical activity may help relieve symptoms such as anxiety, depression and sleeping problems.
- Physical activity also helps reduce many other forms of ill-health such as high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol and being overweight.
- In addition physical activity, along with a healthy diet, helps reduce stress and improves your overall feeling of wellbeing and quality of life.
- It also reduces the risk of osteoporosis and the risk of falling.

STAYING SAFE

- In general, people suffering from chronic pain can exercise safely, but you need to take care with the type of activity you choose, the amount of time you spend doing it, and how intensely you exercise.
- During periods of severe pain it is still possible to do a range of gentle movement exercises, or you can do exercises in a

pool or hydrotherapy unit or use a static bike to help take the weight off your joints.

- It is important to learn the difference between muscle stiffness – which anyone can get and which is a normal response to doing exercise that you are not used to doing – and joint pain due to a specific medical condition such as arthritis.
- Some physiotherapy departments run classes specially designed for people suffering from chronic pain. Your GP, nurse or fitness professional should be able to tell you what is available in your local area.
- Swimming is particularly good as the buoyancy of the water helps to support your body weight and relieve pressure on your joints.

If you get any of the following problems, stop exercising and get medical advice from your GP or by contacting NHS Direct on 0845 4647:

- Extreme fatigue
- Joint or bone pain
- Leg pain or cramps
- Discomfort in your chest or upper body brought on by physical activity
- Uncomfortable or severe breathlessness during your activity
- Dizziness or nausea on exertion
- Fainting during or just after doing physical activity
- Palpitations (a very fast or irregular heart beat) during activity.

WHAT TYPE OF ACTIVITY IS BEST?

While stamina-based activity is particularly important for health benefits, you also need to include some strength and flexibility-based activity to maintain your range of movement and limit the negative effects of chronic pain.

Stamina-type activities: Walking, cycling, swimming, dancing tennis and housework (washing floors or windows)

Strength-type activities: Walking uphill, carrying shopping, climbing stairs, gardening (digging or mowing) and housework.

Flexibility-type activities: Dancing, yoga, T'ai Chi, Pilates and gardening

Tips on increasing your activity level

- Walking is an ideal activity as it's free and easy to do anywhere. Perhaps take a dog for a walk to make it more interesting or use a pedometer to count your steps.
- Look for opportunities to be active during your whole day. For example park at the far end of the car park, or walk one stop further to catch the bus, and take 10 minutes out of your lunch break to go for a walk.
- Try using the stairs instead of the escalator. If you do use the escalator start by walking part of the way up and progress to walking up the whole way.
- Choose activities that you enjoy doing. Involve your friends and family to make your activities fun, sociable and enjoyable.

HOW MUCH AND HOW OFTEN?

Frequency

Your main aim is to build up to 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity on 5 or more days of the week. If this seems too much to start with, try starting with 3 x 10 minute walks spread throughout the day and work towards 2 x 15 minute walks and then 30 continuous minutes. One goal is to try and increase your activity by 2 minutes each day.

Intensity

Moderate intensity means breathing harder and getting warmer than normal. It does not need to be hard. You should be able to talk and be active at the same time.

Advice

Whatever your chosen activity, it should be performed at a gentle intensity which gradually increases until after about 10 minutes you have reached the level you can maintain for your chosen period of activity. This gets the blood flowing to your muscles and allows your heart rate to increase gradually. When you are nearing the end of your activity you should also slowly decrease the level of activity over 5-10 minutes to allow your heart rate to slow down gradually.

Remember

Set yourself realistic goals and don't worry if you miss one day. Just make sure that the next day you pick up where you left off.