

If you have specific concerns or fears about exercise, please speak to a health professional, such as a physiotherapist or your GP.

Many people with persistent pain, fatigue or other ongoing health conditions tell us that keeping active and independent is really important to them. However, people often struggle to know how much to do, or which type of exercise is suitable for their condition. Previous experience of exercise may have been unhelpful, with many people reporting an increase in pain, fatigue and other symptoms.

Although there are some similarities, exercise is different to activity:

- **Activity** includes any movement which requires energy
- **Exercise** is specifically planned, intentional movement with the aim of maintaining or improving physical fitness.

Exercise is sometimes prescribed by physiotherapists and other exercise practitioners, with little consideration of the additional difficulties you experience. Worsening of symptoms in the early stages of an exercise programme can make people think that exercise is causing them harm, and may mean that they are reluctant to stick to exercising regularly.

The good news is that appropriate exercise is known to be beneficial for most health conditions, including arthritis, low back pain, CFS, fibromyalgia and chronic pain. Exercise can be any activity that gets you moving and does not have to involve expensive equipment, gym membership or lycra!

The following steps can help you introduce more exercise into your routine:

- Step 1:** Decide what you want to achieve by being more active, e.g. flexibility (stretching exercise), function (strengthening exercise), or fitness (stamina / aerobic exercise). Think about how being more active will help you to move towards your values e.g. walking for longer may help you to be able to go out with your family more of the time.
- Step 2:** Work out what your current ability level is, and how you might be able to build on that.
- Step 3:** Figure out how you can incorporate exercise into your daily routine. Are you aware of the effects of other activities on your symptoms? Do you need to take this into account when planning your activity?
- Step 4:** Think about what will make it enjoyable and fun (i.e. sustainable!)

You may also find the Pacing section helpful in working out your baseline.

Factsheet

Pacing activity / exercise

What type of exercise?

When thinking about what kind of exercise to undertake, it is important to choose something that you feel comfortable with and preferably that you enjoy, as you are then more likely to keep doing it!

Walking can be undertaken by most people. Forms of exercise such as dancing, canoeing, Wii-fit, and bowling add an element of fun or competition, as well as social contact. Certain types of exercise are also recommended for certain conditions, as they are less likely to cause a flare up in symptoms. For instance:

- Generalised arthritis – low impact activity is good, for example, swimming, cycling, using a cross-trainer, Tai Chi, yoga, or low level weights.
- Fibromyalgia – there are no restrictions but activities that include relaxation can be helpful, for example yoga, Tai Chi, and Pilates.
- CFS – you can do any activity that you have previously found enjoyable, but it is best to start at a very slow pace and gradually increase.
- Lower back pain – swimming, cycling, yoga, Pilates, or light weights may all help.

What happens to the body when we exercise?

There are certain things that will happen when you start to exercise. These are outlined below:

1. **Heart rate increases** – you will notice your heart beating harder. Sometimes it may feel like palpitations. The average resting heart rate for adults is 60 – 70 beats / minute. When you've been active, your heart rate should return to normal within a few minutes
2. **Breathing increases** – your breaths will be bigger and faster. You should still be able to hold a conversation while you're being active. The average breaths per minute for adults at rest is 10 - 12.
3. **Sweating** – you will notice that you sweat more and your skin may flush / redden as increased blood is circulating around your body and your body tries to keep you cool.
4. **'Jelly legs'** – muscle fatigue is a normal part of exercise. To strengthen muscles, they need to be worked to the point of tiredness.
5. **Muscle pain** – when muscles work they produce lactic acid, which creates the familiar post-exercise muscle soreness and stiffness. This should not be excessive and should settle down within a day or two.
6. **Improved mood** – when we exercise our body releases chemicals which can lift our mood and make us feel good. These are produced after about 20 minutes of activity.

There can also be other benefits from exercise regularly including:

- Improved sleep
- Weight loss
- Regulation of blood-sugar

Factsheet

Pacing activity / exercise

- Reduced pain
- Improved concentration
- Stress reduction (uses up adrenaline)
- Reduced blood pressure and improved circulation

How hard should I exercise?

It is difficult to say how hard you should push yourself, but the safest way is to be aware of how much your symptoms have increased afterwards, and how long this increase lasts for. The old adage 'no pain, no gain' does not apply here, and pushing through your symptoms will simply make them worse. Slight increases in symptoms, or general after-effects of exercise as described above, are ok, but these should start to subside fairly soon after you finish your activity. Increases that last for several days usually mean that you have done too much.

Many people now use activity trackers as a guide to how active they should be. The first thing to be aware of is they usually come with a pre-set goal. The Fitbit comes with a pre-set goal of 10,000 steps per day, which, depending upon step length, can equate to several miles. If you want to an activity tracker, the most important thing to do is to set the goal (number of steps) at a level that is consistent with your baseline. Wear it for a few days, and see how many steps you tend to do in a day, making sure that this isn't a day that you know is going to exacerbate your symptoms. Set that as your goal, and try to achieve that every day for a couple of weeks before considering increasing your goal. When increasing your goal, you should not increase by any more than 15-20% at a time, and don't forget that it is okay to stay at a level for as long as you need to.

For specific advice about stretches, strengthening or stamina exercises please discuss with the physiotherapist. If you have any fears about worsening your condition by exercising, it is important that this is addressed before getting started.