

Get the facts on exercise and chronic disease

January 14 2021, by From Mayo Clinic News Network



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If you have a chronic condition, you might have questions about exercising. How often can you exercise? Which exercises are safe? Understand the basics about exercise and chronic disease.

If you have a chronic disease—such as heart disease, diabetes, asthma,

or back or [joint pain](#)—exercise can have important health benefits. However, it's important to talk to your health care provider before starting an exercise routine. He or she might have advice on what exercises are safe and any precautions you might need to take while exercising.

Find out what you need to know about exercise and chronic disease.

If you have a [chronic condition](#), [regular exercise](#) can help you manage symptoms and improve your health.

Aerobic exercise can help improve your heart health and endurance and aid in weight loss. High-intensity interval training is generally safe and effective for most people and can take less time. In [high-intensity interval training](#), you alternate exercising at high levels of intensity and exercising at a less intense level for short periods of time. Even activities such as walking at higher intensities count.

Strength training can improve [muscle strength](#) and endurance, make it easier to do daily activities, slow disease-related declines in muscle strength, and provide stability to joints.

Flexibility exercises may help you to have optimal range of motion about your joints, so they can function best, and stability exercises may help reduce the risk of falls.

For example:

Heart disease. Regular exercise can help improve your heart health. Recent studies have shown that interval training is often tolerated well in people with heart disease, and it can produce significant benefits. For people with high blood pressure, exercise can lower your risk of dying of heart disease and lower the risk of heart disease progressing.

Diabetes. Regular exercise can help insulin more effectively lower your blood sugar level. Physical activity can also help you control your weight and boost your energy. If you have type 2 diabetes, exercise can lower your risk of dying of heart disease.

Asthma. Often, exercise can help control the frequency and severity of asthma attacks.

Back pain. Regular low-impact aerobic activities can increase strength and endurance in your back and improve muscle function. Abdominal and back muscle exercises (core-strengthening exercises) may help reduce symptoms by strengthening the muscles around your spine.

Arthritis. Exercise can reduce pain, help maintain muscle strength in affected joints and reduce joint stiffness. It can also improve physical function and quality of life for people who have arthritis.

Cancer. Exercise can improve the quality of life for people who've had cancer, and it can also improve their fitness. Exercise can also lower the risk of dying from breast, colorectal and prostate cancer.

Dementia. Exercise can improve cognition in people with dementia, and people who are active on a regular basis are at less risk of dementia and cognitive impairment.

Your health care provider might recommend specific exercises to reduce pain or build strength. Depending on your condition, you might also need to avoid certain exercises altogether or during flare-ups. In some cases, you might need to consult a physical or occupational therapist before starting to exercise.

If you have low back pain, for example, you might choose low-impact aerobic activities, such as walking and swimming. These types of

activities won't strain or jolt your back.

If you have exercise-induced asthma, be sure to keep an inhaler handy while you exercise.

If you have arthritis, the exercises that are best for you will depend on the type of arthritis and which joints are involved. Work with your health care provider or a physical therapist to create an exercise plan that will give you the most benefit with the least aggravation on your joints.

Before starting an exercise routine, it's important to talk to your health care provider about how long your exercise sessions can be and what level of intensity is safe for you.

In general, try to accumulate about 30 minutes of [physical activity](#) a day at least five days a week. For example, try walking briskly for about 30 minutes most days of the week. You can even break physical activity up into short chunks of time spread out through the day. Any activity is better than none at all.

If you're not able to do this much activity, do as much as you can. Even an hour a week of physical activity can have health benefits. Start with moving more and sitting less, and work your way up to moving more each day.

If you haven't been active for a while, start slowly and build up gradually. Ask your doctor what kind of exercise goals you can safely set for yourself as you progress.

Depending on your condition, your health care provider might recommend certain precautions before exercising.

If you have diabetes, for example, keep in mind that physical activity

lowers blood sugar. Check your blood sugar level before any activity. If you take insulin or diabetes medications that lower blood sugar, you might need to eat a snack before exercising to help prevent low blood sugar.

If you have arthritis, consider taking a warm shower before you exercise. Heat can relax your joints and muscles and relieve any pain you might have before you begin. Also, be sure to choose shoes that provide shock absorption and stability during exercise.

Talk to your doctor about what kind of discomfort you might expect during or after exercise, as well as any tips for minimizing your pain. Find out what type or degree of pain might be normal and what might be a sign of something more serious.

If you have [heart disease](#), for example, signs or symptoms that you should stop exercising include dizziness, unusual shortness of breath, chest pain or an irregular heartbeat.

Starting a regular [exercise routine](#) can be tough.

To help you stick with your routine, consider exercising with a friend. You might also ask your health care provider to recommend an exercise program for people who have your condition, perhaps through a local hospital, clinic or health club.

To stay motivated, choose activities that are fun, set realistic goals and celebrate your progress.

Share any concerns you might have about your [exercise](#) program—from getting started to keeping it up—with your [health care provider](#).

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