

Pain and Physical Activity

What is the difference between physical activity and exercise? ^[1]

Physical activity refers to *movement* of the body. It is produced by muscles and uses energy. Examples of physical activity could be going to work, playing sport, or undertaking the normal household activities. This information sheet focuses on physical activity.

Exercise is a little different. Exercise is done to improve or maintain physical fitness and is usually planned, structured, and repetitive.

What is so bad about being inactive?

Around the world in 2008 figures from the World Health Organisation showed that about 30% of adults over 15 years did not move enough for good health. More sobering was that approximately 3.2 million deaths each year can be put down to not getting enough physical activity.

We know that being physically active is good for us. It can reduce the risk of high blood pressure, heart problems, having a stroke, getting diabetes, getting breast and colon cancer, suffering depression and having a fall. Physical activity is also important in using up energy and helping keep weight steady.

What levels of physical activity do the world activity guidelines recommend?

18–64 years old:

For adults of this age group, physical activity includes recreational or leisure-time physical activity, transportation (e.g walking or cycling), occupational (i.e. work), household chores, play, games, sports or planned exercise, in the context of daily, family, and community activities. In order to improve cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness, bone health and reduce the risk of non-communicable diseases and depression the following are recommended:

1. Adults aged 18–64 years should do at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity throughout the week, or do at least 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity throughout the week, or an equivalent combination of moderate- and vigorous-intensity activity
2. Aerobic activity should be performed in bouts of at least 10 minutes duration

3. For additional health benefits, adults should increase their moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity to 300 minutes per week, or engage in 150 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity per week, or an equivalent combination of moderate- and vigorous-intensity activity
4. Muscle-strengthening activities should be done involving major muscle groups on 2 or more days a week

What's the link between physical activity and chronic pain?

From the science, we know that many people with chronic pain are still physically just as active as people without pain. What the evidence can't tell us yet is whether being inactive actually causes pain. There is some good news-people who are physically active have less problems with their chronic pain and this is a good place to start ^[2].

How can I start becoming more active with pain?

When people have pain it can be easy to slip into thinking about "how pain limits my activity". These thoughts might lead people to turn to passive treatments like heat packs or medication. These types of coping strategies may be OK for a couple of weeks after acute injury but are less helpful when pain is ongoing.

Instead, there has been a recent trend toward focusing on the levels of physical activity level that people with pain *can* sustain- without having a flare up^{[3][4]}. The message is:-increasing physical activity levels, slowly can be achieved, even with current pain.

So, let's begin...

In whole person pain management the first steps are finding an **average tolerance** for an activity and then practicing that amount regularly.

Taking walking as an example, you could try keeping a log book for 4-5 days or you could wear a pedometer to keep a check on how many steps you are taking. If you have a smart phone you could download an app to do the job. After several days you will have enough information to determine your average walking level. For some, if walking is difficult a better activity to work on could be standing up. In this case, making a habit of standing up more often will gradually reduce the amount of time you spend being sedentary. Finding your average tolerance for being "up" can be the starting point, perhaps aiming for around 1 minute of "up-time" out of every 20 minutes. Over time it is possible to slowly build up your level of activity.

Will exercise reduce my pain? ^[5]

If you have chronic low back pain, exercise appears to be slightly effective at decreasing pain and improving function in adults with chronic low-back pain.

What if I have fibromyalgia? ^[6]

There is very good evidence that supervised aerobic exercise training has beneficial effects on physical capacity and fibromyalgia symptoms. Strength training may also have benefits on some fibromyalgia symptoms. There is less research on the long-term benefit of exercise for fibromyalgia.

References

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