

Exercising with Persistent Pain

Why You Feel Pain

When you are injured, your mind and body react. They protect the weak part of your body, and you feel pain when you try to use it.

This protection is important if you have a sudden, or acute, injury, such as surgery or an accident. The pain keeps you from using the injured part of your body so it can heal.

If your pain continues for a long time after the injury has healed, you have “persistent” pain. Your mind and body continue to protect the injury. But now the weak part of your body will not get any better if you do not use it. Instead, it will just get weaker.

Why You Need to Exercise

Exercise will build the flexibility and strength of the weak parts of your body. It can help you reduce your pain in the long run and improve the quality of your life.

The information in this handout tells you how to make changes in your life that can help you reduce your pain and increase your ability to move around.

Before You Start Exercising

Before you start an exercise program, ask your doctor if you have any health problems, such as heart trouble. If you don't have any known heart trouble, moderate exercise is generally safe.

***Before You Start
Exercising,
continued***

Before you start exercising your whole body, you may have to work on the specific areas that are very weak. For example, you may need to build up the strength of your joints and muscles. Ask your doctor about what you should exercise first. A physical therapist can help you improve the strength and flexibility of these specific areas. Your doctor and the therapist can tell you which types of exercise are safest for you.

***Goal of Your
Exercise Program***

Remember, your exercise program is not something you will do for a while and then stop. The goal is to improve your strength, flexibility, and endurance for life.

There are many ways to reach this goal. The right way for you is one you can enjoy and fit into your lifestyle. Here are some tips:

- Look for exercise activities that are enjoyable and will help you move better.
- Try a number of activities before you decide how you will exercise.
- Don't give up if the first few activities you try aren't fun or don't work out.
- Start with light exercises for short times. Over weeks and months, gradually exercise harder and longer. This will help you avoid additional injury and pain.
- Do several types of exercises. They can spread out the benefits (and the stresses) to your body. The table at the end of this handout gives you a list of exercises.
- Do different exercises to build flexibility, strength, and endurance.

Flexibility

Tight muscles can be easily injured. For this reason, you need to increase your flexibility. Here are some ways:

- Stretch tight muscles and joints.
- Concentrate on the most painful joints and muscles first.
- Move your body part, such as your leg, to the point where you feel a little resistance or discomfort. Hold it there for a slow count to 10. Repeat this movement 4 to 10 times.
- If you have a problem with a joint or limb, ask your doctor or therapist how much stretching is safe.

Strength

Two types of exercise help you increase your muscle strength.

Isometric Exercise

Isometric exercise tightens the muscles without moving the joints and body.

Try this simple isometric exercise:

1. Sit in a chair near a wall.
2. Face the wall.
3. Try to straighten your leg by pushing the wall away with your foot.

What happens? The wall doesn't move, but you can feel your leg muscles working. This workout will strengthen your muscles, without putting strain on your joints.

continued

**Strength,
continued**

Isometric Exercise, continued

Isometric exercises can strengthen all muscle groups. To start:

- Work from the top of your body to the bottom.
- Tighten each muscle once for a 5 count. This is 1 “repetition.”
- Don’t overdo it. You don’t want to strain so hard that you injure your muscles. If nothing hurts, you can do these exercises a few times a day.

Each week add 1 more set of exercises a day and 1 more repetition. Set a target of 6 times a day and 10 repetitions for each muscle.

Isometric exercise is a good way to start if your muscles are weak and activity is painful. But it is not the most effective way to build body strength. To gain the maximum strength, you also need isotonic exercise.

Isotonic Exercise

Isotonic exercise builds strength more effectively because the joint moves as the muscles are contracted. Examples of isotonic exercise are weight lifting and stretching with elastic bands. Most daily activities involve isotonic muscle exercise.

Weight training is a practical and effective way to make muscles stronger. Exercises with elastic bands are inexpensive and practical for home use.

Start with light resistance. Do 4 to 6 repetitions for each major muscle group, no more than twice a week.

**Strength,
continued**

Isotonic Exercise, continued

If you are not familiar with weights and strength-building exercise, most health and fitness centers have trainers who can help you start. A physical therapist can also advise you on which isotonic exercises will be safe for you.

Endurance

You can improve your endurance with aerobic exercise. Aerobic exercise builds your general fitness and increases how long you can do an activity.

With aerobic exercise, your whole body is engaged in some type of physical activity. Examples are walking, yard work, dancing, swimming, and cycling.

Begin with an exercise that you know you can do safely (for example, walking) at a comfortable pace. Move fast enough to sweat, but not so fast that you can't carry on a conversation. Stretch out muscles before and after your aerobic exercise.

At first, start slowly. Exercise for only 15 to 30 minutes, 3 to 4 times a week. Then, each week you can move a little faster and work a little longer, with a target of over 30 minutes of aerobic exercise 3 or 4 times a week.

Too much endurance exercise can increase your risk of injury (5 times a week is not recommended). At any point, stop exercising and consult your doctor if you become light headed or have other problems.

What to Do If...

Exercise may not always be easy, but you have to keep working at it if you want to gain the benefits. If you experience pain or health problems that stop you, do the following:

- Don't give up. Talk to your doctor or therapist about how to get around the problem you find.
- Take some acetaminophen (Tylenol) or your pain medicine. This may help you exercise more comfortably.
- Get a massage or use heat and cold to ease the sore muscles.
- Keep at it. If you don't use your body regularly, you will lose the ability to do things for yourself.

Types of Exercise

The following are suggestions for the types of exercises you might try.

- Stretching
- Chair exercises
- Isometrics
- Weight training
- Elastic band resistance (pulls)
- Walking (outside, shopping, walking the dog)
- Treadmill (in front of the TV, at the gym)
- Yoga (for strength and flexibility)
- Tai Chi
- Low impact aerobics
- Dancing
- Swimming
- Water aerobics (in a warm water pool)
- Cycling (outside or stationary bike)
- Stairs (take them – they're free)
- Sports (one you can enjoy)

Exercise Tips

Here are some ways to exercise safely for life.

- Exercise daily (not too hard or too long) to start.
- Alternate endurance and strengthening exercises.
- Stretch out all your muscles before and after (see How to Stretch — Stretches while Sitting).
- A warm shower or bath can loosen you up before you start.
- Start with low intensity and duration and go slow in increasing your activity.
- Exercise with a friend or join a gym or exercise group.
- Carry a cellular telephone.
- Work hard enough to sweat but not so hard that you can't carry on a conversation.
- Ask for advice if something hurts when you exercise.