

Physical activity - how to get started

If you are new to exercise or are coming back from a long spell, there are things you should do to make sure that your exercise program is effective and brings benefits, not injury or pain.

First of all, visit your doctor

If you've been inactive and want to begin physical activity, see a doctor first if:

- You are over the age of 40
- Physical activity causes pain in your chest
- You often faint or have spells of severe dizziness
- Moderate physical activity makes you very breathless
- You have a condition that gives you a higher risk of heart disease – for example smoking, being overweight, having a high blood cholesterol or high blood pressure
- You think you might have heart disease or your doctor has said you have heart problems
- You are pregnant.

Setting goals

Setting goals gives you something to work towards and provides you with a way to measure how well you are doing over a period of time. When it comes to succeeding at your exercise program, setting goals and monitoring your progress will help you stay on track and get you to where you want to go!

One of the first steps is to identify why exercise is important to you. Ask yourself what you want to get out of becoming more active. Think about the benefits you want to experience if you choose to be more active, as well as the barriers that are holding you back. It may be helpful to make a list of the pros and cons. Which barriers do you feel strongest about? What are the benefits that you want to experience?

Start easy

If you are currently inactive or feel your fitness level is low, start gently with a short session of an activity that you feel you can manage. Build your confidence and fitness level with a number of short sessions.

There are no set rules about how you progress. If you have not exercised for some time, you should progress slowly. Increase the length and the intensity of your exercise session gradually. Don't push yourself straightaway. Injury or discomfort can occur and this will dampen your spirits.

Stretching, warm up and cool down

As the name suggests, the warm-up is designed to increase the body's internal temperature and warm your muscles so as to prevent muscle strains, sprains and stretched muscles. The best way is to start off at a leisurely pace, and then pick up speed. Usually a five to 10 minute warm-up is all you'll need, but this will vary from person to person and if the weather is cold.

In the same way, for the last five minutes of your exercise, slow down and allow your body to cool down gradually, letting your heart rate and breathing rate come back to normal.

Stretching suggestions

Stretching should be part of your warm-up and cool-down routines. Stretching helps reduce muscle soreness. Take your time when you stretch.

- Stretch your muscles after your warm-up exercises.
- Stretching should never be painful. Only stretch a muscle to the point of mild discomfort. If it hurts, you're pushing too hard – ease off.
- Don't bounce or you could overstretch muscle tissue which leads to muscle stiffness and tenderness. Hold the stretch for around 10 to 30 seconds.
- Stretch opposing muscle groups one after the other. For example, stretch your quadriceps (muscles on the front of the thigh) then stretch the hamstrings (muscles on the back of the thigh).
- Remember to keep breathing normally as you stretch.

What should I wear?

Make sure you have comfortable clothing, a suitable pair of shoes and water (and perhaps sunscreen and a hat if you are outside). Your shoes should provide good support and the best type will depend on the activity you are doing. The wrong type of shoe could cause foot pain or blisters.

Technique

If you are trying something new, or getting back into an activity you have not done for awhile, it might pay to get some coaching or instruction. Depending on the activity, incorrect or poor technique may lead to injury or soreness.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Physiotherapist
- Sports physician
- Qualified Personal Trainer
- Exercise physiologist ESSA Exercise & Sports Science Australia
- Australian Physiotherapy Association Tel. (03) 9092 0888

Things to remember

- If you haven't exercised for a while, see your doctor before starting an exercise program.
- Warming up before exercise is a good way to reduce the risk of injury and to prepare yourself physically as well as mentally for activity.
- Concentrate on warming up the specific muscle groups you will be using in your exercise and include stretches.
- It is important to cool down after exercise.

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Physical Activity Australia

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