

The Benefits of Being Physically Active

- With regular, consistent physical activity, patients with chronic pain receive the same fitness benefits as healthy people, including a stronger heart and skeletal muscles, better lung function and breathing capacity, modest weight control, lower blood pressure, and an overall reduction in risk factors for lifestyle diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, etc.

Lifestyle Activity vs. Exercise

- If you have chronic pain and are already physically active, congratulations! Keep up the good work!

- If you have chronic pain and are not currently active, think about becoming more active to help control your symptoms and improve your quality of life and well-being.

- You have the ability to manage your symptoms and improve your day-to-day life by becoming more physically active. It is a powerful concept that can easily be a reality.

- Lifestyle activity and exercise are important components of a well-rounded chronic pain management plan. Though similar, each refers to different types of physical activity across a vast spectrum.

- Lifestyle activity includes physical actions you perform as part of daily living. Lifestyle activity is generally not planned and occurs as a consequence of working, traveling, raising children, etc. – just plain living. While some lifestyle activities are more strenuous than others, all can generally be done without worsening symptoms. And, like structured exercise, they have been shown to improve pain and fatigue.

- Exercise includes physical actions that use repetitive motion of large muscle groups to improve physical fitness. Often, “exercise” is structured by the amount of time, intensity and type of activity. Aerobic exercise, strength training and flexibility training are key elements of a well-rounded fitness program.

- More than likely, you will engage in both exercise and lifestyle activity over the course of your life depending on your goals and your life schedule. The effects of both are cumulative. In other words, it all adds up. Little snippets of activity throughout the day are better than no activity at all. You will likely feel better over time by becoming more active on a daily basis, and you will have more energy to devote to yourself, your family, your work and, of course, fun.

Choosing the “Best” Activities for Chronic Pain

- Generally, there is no “best” activity for chronic pain. But remember, some activity is better than none! Choose activities that you enjoy (or at least find tolerable) and locations that are convenient to your work or home. This will make it easier for you to begin participating in them and, more importantly, stick with them over time.

When choosing activities, be mindful of your physical limitations and make adjustments to suit your needs. There are many ways to do this, including reducing the intensity of a movement. For example, if an aerobics DVD requires you to jog in place, try marching in place instead. Or if a treadmill (weight-bearing) is too strenuous on your joints, try a stationary bike or pool instead (non-weight-bearing). Minor adjustments like these can make activities more comfortable so you’ll be more likely to do them and get more out of them.

- If you are considering adding structured exercise to your life, start with aerobic activities (walking, swimming/water aerobics, running, bicycling, etc.) These activities increase your heart rate and breathing rate, as well as your body temperature so you sweat. These are normal responses to exercise. Typically, aerobic activities lead to the greatest benefits for chronic pain symptoms. Think about adding flexibility training and strength training later after your body has adapted to the overall increase in activity.

Becoming More Physically Active

- There are no concrete rules about the best way to become more active. Many factors impact where you begin and how you progress, such as your energy level on a given day or week, a recent flare, your life schedule, what facilities are available to you, etc.

- Two key factors to effectively incorporate activity into your life are:

1. Understanding how to exercise properly to avoid injury or overexertion

2. Knowing how to progress slowly so that your newfound habit becomes a lifelong endeavor.

- Proper exercise techniques and other tips, such as being fitted for the appropriate walking or running shoes, talking to an exercise instructor, adjusting exercise equipment (bike, weight machines, etc.) to suit your body, and having good posture and a stable stance while weight training, will go a long way toward enhancing your experience and allowing you to get the greatest possible benefit with the least harm. Another way to keep you motivated to stay active is to have an exercise partner or work-out buddy. Having a friend encourage you along the way can make exercise a lot easier and more fun!

- When you start to increase your activity, whether it is for the first time in your life or after a break from regular activity, always start low and go slow. Don’t be afraid to push yourself

a little bit. Physical activity should be more strenuous than you are used to doing for your body to adapt and grow and for your symptoms to improve. For instance, you'll notice that when you first start walking, one lap around the block might feel hard; but after a few weeks of regular walking, that same block won't feel quite as difficult to you. You've adapted to the demands of completing one lap and are ready to add another.

- This won't happen overnight, but it will happen. It's all up to you. You are the one who will be active. You are the one who decides what to do and how much. You are the one who can help yourself feel better by living an active life.

General Exercise Guidelines

- Use a total fitness program including exercises that improve cardiovascular fitness, muscle strength, and joint range of motion.
- Choose activities that you enjoy doing, such as walking, swimming, bicycling, dancing and resistance training.
- You can exercise during a flare, but reduce the amount of exercise by half, decrease exercise time, resistance, and intensity.
- Start slowly, doing 5 to 10 minutes of cardiovascular exercise and using minimal resistance for strength training exercises.
- Warm up and cool down at every exercise session.
- Progress slowly and methodically at your own pace.
- Employ proper technique, which is critical to safe and effective exercise.
- Concentrate on maintaining good posture while exercising.
- Exercise should be fun and social; try to exercise with a friend.
- Use moderate intensity, which is sufficient to improve cardiovascular fitness, muscle strength and flexibility.
- Perform exercises regularly: cardiovascular exercise: 3 to 5 times per week, strength training: 2 to 3 times per week.
- Avoid too much exercise – you should feel energized, not exhausted, at the end of an exercise session.

Cardio-Vascular Exercise

- Monitor your level of effort with the “talk test” – if you cannot carry on a conversation while exercising, you are working too hard and need to slow down.
- Start slowly – 5 to 10 minutes per session for deconditioned persons.
- Progress methodically – 10% increase in time every 3 to 6 sessions.
- Choose low-impact activities, such as water exercise, cycling, walking, and dancing.

Strength Training Exercise

- Avoid intense or forceful muscle effort while exercising.
- Do 1 set of 8 to 12 repetitions, which is sufficient for strength improvement.
- Increase the number of sets as your fitness level improves.
- Do exercises that involve the major muscles of the body.
- When possible, use multi-joint exercises rather than single joint movements.
- Make sure movements are smooth and fluid.
- Perform exercises through a full range of motion, but do not push the end range.
- Discontinue exercise if muscles become sore or exhausted.
- Make sure you get adequate rest between exercises.

Flexibility Exercise

- Stretch after your body is warmed up.
- Avoid overstretching.
- Avoid bouncing when you stretch – hold the position of slight stretch for 20 to 60 seconds while you relax the muscles.
- Move joints through full range of motion when performing an exercise.

10 Things to Remember:

1. Incorporate lifestyle activity into your daily schedule slowly. If you try to accomplish too much too soon, you are vulnerable to injury, symptom flares or falling short of your goals.
2. Beginning an exercise program is not always easy. It takes time to establish a routine and feel comfortable with it.
3. Initially you may feel more fatigued and sore following an increase in physical activity, but don't give up! This is normal. Activity-related soreness will diminish over time.
4. Your body will adapt, improve and grow if you stimulate it with physical activity.
5. If you are doing aerobic activities, you may feel slightly winded or short of breath during your workout. This is normal; hyperventilation or panting is not.
6. Every exercise program is highly individualized. What is best for one person may not suit another – patients with chronic pain are no exception!
7. Refrain from strenuous activity during a symptom flare but continue to be active. If you experience a symptom flare, reduce your exercise time by half and increase to your pre-flare level over the course of a week.
8. Your initial goals should be small and achievable, e.g., being active for five minutes daily, attending a water aerobics class twice a week, scheduling activities on your calendar and doing them when the time comes.
9. Your long-range goals can be loftier (but still achievable), e.g., managing your symptoms, being active consistently for 30 minutes/3-4 days per week, going back to work part-time, etc.
10. GET MOVING AND DON'T STOP!

Source: <http://rheum.med.ufl.edu/patient-resources/fibromyalgia/fibromyalgia-exercises/>