

FAST FACTS: Exercise as Nondrug Pain Treatment

EXERCISE – any activity that requires physical effort. Regular exercise can help improve health, fitness, and physical function as well as reduce chronic pain.

How Does It Work?

- Exercise improves strength, flexibility, endurance, and overall physical function to perform daily activities with less effort
- Exercising releases natural chemicals and analgesics in the spinal cord and brain to block pain signals
- Exercise causes immune cells to release natural chemicals that block pain signals and heal injured tissue
- Exercise can reduce stress, depression, and anxiety

There are different types of exercise, such as aerobic, strengthening, and stretching exercise.

- Aerobic - exercises that raises your heart rate and breathing rate. This type of exercise will help you be more active for longer and reduce pain.
 - Examples: Walking, cycling, running, swimming, gardening
- Strengthening - exercises that build muscle strength, reduce pain, and improve function. This type of exercise will improve your ability to perform tasks and participate in activities.
 - Examples: weight lifting, resistance bands, hiking
- Stretching - exercises that help with mobility, movement, and pain.
 - Examples: yoga, tai chi, Pilates

Tips to get started

- Discuss your loved one's exercise goals with a healthcare provider before starting an exercise program.
- Discuss the benefits of exercise with your loved one and encourage them to be more active than they currently are
- Help them stay safe by advising them to:
 - Start with low-intensity exercises and slowly build-up.
 - Wear proper shoes for the exercise. Comfortable, non-skid shoes are recommended for most types of exercise.
 - Warm-up before exercising with light activity and cool down after for 2-3 minutes each.

- Stay hydrated by drinking water before, while, and after exercising.
- Encourage them to stay motivated by helping them come up with an exercise plan:
 - Find a time for exercise. Talk to your loved one about how to fit physical activity either throughout their day or at a specific time of day.
 - Do something they enjoy. There are many forms of exercise, you can help your loved one find something that they enjoy and try something new to avoid boredom.
 - Track their exercise. You can create or download an exercise log. Phone apps can also help keep track of physical activity, such as workouts and steps (i.e. iPhone Health, MyFitnessPal, Google Fit). Wearable devices (i.e. Fitbit, Garmin, and Apple Watch) can keep track of steps, heart rate, and calories burned.
 - Exercise can be done anywhere. Many exercises can be done in their home. Household objects can be used as weight (i.e. water bottle).
- For more information on how to get started, safety tips, and exercise videos, check out these links:
 - <https://uihc.org/health-topics/exercise-treat-chronic-pain>
 - https://uihc.org/sites/default/files/exercises_for_chronic_pain.pdf
 - <https://go4life.nia.nih.gov/>

References: University of Iowa Hospital & Clinics. (March, 2018). Exercise to Treat Chronic Pain. Retrieved from <https://uihc.org/health-topics/exercise-treat-chronic-pain>.

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