



Exercise and Ongoing Pain

Exercise is an important part of managing pain. Regular exercise can help improve your general fitness and return to the activities you enjoy or need to do.

Research shows that exercise benefits your health and wellbeing. You, like many people who have ongoing pain, may have reduced your activity to try to relieve your symptoms. Often movement is reduced or avoided because of concerns of causing re-injury or further damage.

Unfortunately this inactivity leads to stiffness, muscle weakness, low mood and reduced fitness levels. This is known as de-conditioning. In the long term this reduces your ability to perform daily activities and enjoy yourself socially. It can be hard to break out of this vicious circle.

There are many benefits to exercise (see below). Initially (due to de-conditioning) exercise may cause an increase in your pain. However if you exercise in a controlled and paced way the potential benefits are well worth the hard work.

You can record your exercise on the 'My Activity' tracker in the 'Take Action' section of the patient online platform, available for patients registered with the Pain Service and accessible through the Pain Service website. You can also do this yourself by setting goals yourself on paper (see the section on Goals).

Why do our bodies need to exercise?

1. Joints

Our joints are lined with *cartilage*. This covers the areas of bone, which would rub on each other to prevent bone damage during joint movement. Cartilage has no blood supply and receives food and oxygen from lubricating fluid. This fluid is pumped around the cartilage and bone during joint movement. Improving muscle strength also helps to reduce the strain on the joint.

2. Bones

More calcium salts are put down making the bones stronger. The support structures within the bone become adapted to the forces we put through them – just like the supporting struts of a bridge have to face the right way to be able to carry the load.

3. Heart

The heart, like other muscles, will become stronger and more efficient with active exercise. This exercise needs to be aerobic i.e. speed your heart rate up, to get the best results.

For aerobic exercise you need to increase your heart rate to a target rate set by your age and keep it in this range for a set period of time. This needs to be done at least 3 times a week. Gym instructors and sports therapists can give you more advice if you are interested in this. As the heart becomes “fitter” through exercise it pumps blood more efficiently around the body. This reduces the risk of heart attack and helps to reduce blood pressure.

Why do our bodies need to exercise? Continued...

4. Lungs

Exercise helps your lungs to become fitter as it improves the efficiency in which red blood cells absorb oxygen and release carbon dioxide in the blood. As with the heart this needs to be aerobic exercise. We have all experienced being “out of breath” - remember running to catch the last bus? With exercise our breathing becomes more efficient and our lungs increase their capacity to provide oxygen and get rid of carbon dioxide from our exercising muscles and joints.

5. Metabolism / Weight

Exercise improves the "metabolism". This increases the use of stores of energy in our bodies. First we use the sugar and carbohydrates that are in our blood, and then we use the fat stores. Therefore, by watching our food intake and increasing exercises levels we start to lose fat.

Exercise helps you to burn off fat. You may not lose weight as muscle weighs heavier -but you will certainly look and feel fitter. It also helps to prevent late onset diabetes as it uses up the sugar hanging around the bloodstream. If you need more support to lose weight talk to your pain practitioner.

You may also like to use the ‘Weight Tracker’ and Activity Tracker on the Patients Online platform (KYOH) which you can access through the Pain Service website

Why do our bodies need to exercise? Continued...

6. Nervous system

Regular exercise helps to re-establish smooth, efficient patterns of movement. Movement is complicated. To get smooth and efficient movement, muscles must be co-ordinated so that some relax whilst others tighten. The brain learns to recognise patterns of movement. With practice movements we perform are of better quality with less effort. Think of a gymnast's elegance or the frustrating process of learning to drive!

7. The brain

During exercise the body releases its own natural pain relieving and "feel good" chemicals - endorphins and encephalins. This is why some people become "addicted" to exercise!

You can also have a sense of achievement and satisfaction - this in itself will have all sorts of benefits!