

Improving health and fitness

Getting started with exercise

It is ok to exercise when you have an ongoing pain problem. Knowing how to get started is what makes the difference from doing exercise that 'winds up your pain', and learning how to exercise at a level that is easily manageable and is working with your pain.

It is important that you stay healthy by doing exercise that you enjoy and that is in keeping with your values. Not everyone is naturally sporty and so we don't want you to feel that you have to go to the gym, or join an exercise class in order to improve your current exercise levels.

Sometimes simple activities such as going for a walk with your dog, playing with your grandchildren, and pottering in the garden are good ways to get started. Once you start re-connecting with what's important to you, you will find that exercise becomes a means to continuing to do activities that you enjoy rather than doing exercise because you've been told it will be good for you!

If you're not currently doing any exercise we would recommend that you start by doing gentle stretches and reconnecting with your body by learning 'core stability' type postures and movements. Very often we 'disconnect' from our bodies as a way of coping with pain. The problem with this approach is that we then have very little awareness of what our body is doing and how it feels and we miss early cues as to when to change the exercise or stop.

Useful mind-body cues to check for when you exercise

- Holding your breath
- Tensing up around your neck and shoulders
- Slowing down as you get tired, or speeding up to get it over with!
- Your muscles may start to shake, or your foot placement becomes more clumsy
- Your thoughts may start to wander e.g. thinking about what your plans are for later that day

Pain is not a useful indicator of how much exercise to do. We might feel fine at the time but find that our pain levels increase afterwards, later that day or even sometimes up to 72 hours after the event. Other times, it might feel fine and you may wonder whether you have exercised enough!

The key aim is to be able to exercise at a consistent level on a daily basis. The focus should be on doing exercises that move you closer to achieving your values-based goals. For example, you want to be able to get on the floor to play with your grandchildren. This may involve practicing getting up and down off the floor, gradually introducing more mat work at home, and breaking down the movement into its smaller component parts.

So let's practice getting to know our bodies a bit more. You can do this next exercise in standing, sitting or lying down. You do not need to stay still and if moving around helps, do so. You will be repeatedly asked to notice something. In each case, take up to 10 seconds before you read on.

Useful mind-body cues to check for when you exercise

- Notice your feet
- Notice what position your legs are in
- Notice the position and curvature of your spine
- Notice the rhythm, speed and depth of your breathing
- Notice the position of your arms
- Notice what you can feel in your neck and shoulders
- Notice your body temperature and which parts of your body feel warmest and coolest
- Notice the air on your skin
- Scan your body from head to toe. Notice any stiffness, tension, pain, or discomfort anywhere Scan your body from head to toe. Notice any pleasant or comfortable sensations



If you're not used to doing this, it can feel a bit strange at first. We would recommend you get into a habit of doing this at the start of each new exercise so that you are fully entering into the new starting position before you begin to move. Very often when people learn an exercise for the first time, their attention is on the movement they are trying to do and not the starting position. Combining these body awareness skills with breathing techniques is a good way to reduce muscle tension and ease into each movement.

Here are some useful websites to help get you started:

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/getting-started-guides/Pages/getting-started-guides.aspx>

<http://www.webmd.boots.com/fitness-exercise/default.htm>

<http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/fitness/in-depth/fitness/art-20048269>

<http://www.bupa.co.uk/individuals/health-information/directory/e/exercise-getting-started>

<http://www.wikihow.com/Start-Your-Own-Exercise-Regimen-and-Stick-to-It>

http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/GettingHealthy/PhysicalActivity/GettingActive/Getting-Started---Tips-for-Long-term-Exercise-Success_UCM_307979_Article.jsp