# A red heart with text on a black background

**Why should I exercise?**

Exercise is good for your health. When it comes to your heart, it can reduce your risk of heart and circulatory diseases by up to 35%, giving you peace of mind and a longer life. Getting active can also help you:

* control your weight
* boost energy and improve sleep
* improve mental health
* improve symptoms of heart and circulatory conditions like angina in the long-term, making everyday life easier and letting you do more
* reduce blood pressure and cholesterol, which lowers your risk of getting heart and circulatory diseases like heart attacks, strokes and vascular dementia
* reduce feelings of stress.

**Should I exercise?**

It’s normal to worry whether you should exercise if you’ve got a heart problem. Most people will still be able to and feel the benefits of staying active. In most cases, getting your muscles and lungs working better helps put less strain on your heart. However, there are some things to keep in mind before getting active:

* heart conditions – with some conditions, you may have to think about whether you can use weights, or how intense your exercise can be. If you use GTN spray to manage your chest pain, speak to your doctor or pharmacist about how you can use it when you exercise
* medicines – some may affect your exercise. For example, beta blockers affect your heart rate and may make you feel more tired. Talk with your doctor to find the medicine that works for you
* implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD) and pacemakers – most people with these implanted devices can exercise safely and your doctor should tell you if you have any limits to what you should do. This often means sticking to moderate intensity exercise (like walking and gardening) and avoiding contact sports like rugby
* listen to your body – you should only exercise if you’re feeling well enough to do so. If you start to feel symptoms such as chest pain, palpitations (the feeling like your heart is pounding, or skipping a beat) or unusual shortness of breath, you may need to scale back your exercise. Speak to your doctor If you’re experiencing this
* the weather – if it’s too hot or too cold, your heart may be under more strain to exercise. If this is the case, try a low-stress activity like stretching instead.

If your doctor is happy for you to exercise, you can start by choosing an activity that’s right for you.

It’s important that you speak to your doctor before beginning any physical activity for the first time. They can answer any questions you may have, tell you about exercising with your condition and provide you with specific information to help you safely get active.

You should not start any exercise if you are currently feeling symptoms and should stop and rest if you notice them during your exercise. If this happens, you may need to scale back the intensity of your exercise until you've spoken to your doctor.

If you have chest pain that’s not gone away or any other symptoms of a heart attack, call 999.

**What type of exercise should I do?**

Not all exercise is the same and the different types of exercise you do, have different benefits for your body. The recommended types of exercise for improving heart health are:

* aerobic exercise - when you’re moving your body in a way that makes you warm and slightly out of breath like when walking, cycling, doing housework or gardening. Over time, this type of exercise helps your heart and circulatory system to work better by helping to lower your blood pressure and resting heart rate, improving cholesterol levels and helping you maintain a healthy weight
* balance and flexibility exercise – exercise like yoga, tai chi and Pilates where we hold our bodies in less stable positions. These exercises make sure our muscles don’t get too tight and keep us flexible, helping avoid pain or injury and reduce the risk of having falls
* resistance exercise – resistance training like lifting weights or using resistance bands and cables to strengthen your muscles. The stronger your muscles are, the harder they can work which takes the strain off your heart making it easier to do everyday tasks. Check in with your doctor before you start any resistance training as it may not be suitable for some people with heart conditions.

It’s important to remember that getting active doesn’t have to mean spending lots of time doing an activity that you may not enjoy. It can be something as simple as playing with your grandkids, walking to the shop or gardening. If it gets you a little out of breath, you’re being active.

For most people, your weekly exercise should be a combination of aerobic, resistance and flexibility and balance activities for well-rounded health.

**How much exercise should I do?**

It’s recommended that you do at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity exercise per week. Moderate exercise is when you feel warm and comfortably breathless like walking or pushing a lawn mower. Intense exercise is when you breathe hard and fast like running, swimming or cycling.

What one person finds moderate may be intense to another. That’s why it’s helpful to do the ‘talk test’ while you’re exercising to find the right level for you. The talk test:

* if you can comfortably talk while being active
* feel warm and are breathing a little more heavily than normal
* you're moving at the right pace.

Whether it’s walking or weights, it’s important to start low and slow and to ‘listen’ to your body. A session could be as little as five or ten minutes. Even the smallest changes can have great results.

It’s best to spread your exercise evenly over the week, making sure you have some rest days to ensure your body recovers. Recovery can be just as important for improving your fitness as the exercise itself. Being active is about living a happier, healthier life and should fit into it how you live.

**How do I prepare for exercise?**

Setting yourself up properly can make the difference to how you feel when you exercise. To get the most out of your activity, prepare by:

* eating early and right – eat carbohydrate-based foods in plenty of time before exercising for energy and to avoid feeling too full
* getting the essentials together – get your equipment ready, wear light, loose clothing and have a bottle of water and towel to hand
* preparing your space – if you’re at the gym, know what equipment you plan on using and where those things are. If at home, make sure there’s enough room to exercise, move anything in your way and that you won’t be interrupted
* warming up and cooling down – stretching and starting slow helps loosen you up, lowering the chance of getting hurt and improving your movement.

**Why should I warm up and cool down?**

It’s easy to skip if you’re tired or in a rush but warming up and cooling down is important to staying safe and getting the most out of your workout. Warming up and cooling down helps by:

* getting you in the right mood to exercise
* preparing your body by raising your heart rate slowly, so there isn't a sudden increase in workload for your heart
* sending blood to the active areas of your body
* stretching to keep your muscles from shortening and increasing flexibility
* warming up your muscles and preparing the joints for movement.
* If you have a heart condition, a warmup should last at least 15 minutes and a cool down should last at least 10 minutes. Older adults may need 15 - 20 minutes.

**What should I eat and drink?**

Whatever your activity level, to stay fit and healthy everyone needs a good balance and variety of foods. This means choosing healthy carbohydrates, lean proteins, eating more fruit and vegetables and keeping hydrated.

* Carbohydrates - these are your body’s main source of energy when you're exercising. It’s best to choose high fibre, wholegrain varieties of oats, pasta, rice, breads and cereals. Carbohydrates provide the slow release of energy you need to fuel your exercise. There’s no need to eat extra carbohydrates if you’re active unless you’re training for longer events.
* Fruit and vegetables - these are packed with vitamins, minerals, and fibre which help keep your body and immune system healthy when you exercise. Aim for at least five portions a day.
* Protein - known as the building blocks of life, these help your body grow and repair. You should try and include a portion of protein like lean meat, fish, eggs, dairy or alternatives sources like peas, pulses or beans with most meals.
* Fluids - exercising raises your body temperature and your body tries to cool down by sweating. This causes a loss of water and salts through the skin. How much fluid you need depends on how long you exercise for, the temperature, and the amount you sweat. For most people, unless you are exercising for more than an hour, drinking 6 to 8 glasses of fluid (water, squash, fruit juice, caffeine-free teas) a day is a good idea.

Allow enough time to eat and drink before exercising to ensure your food is fully digested and avoid feeling sick or uncomfortable during exercise. Try to have a balanced meal 2 to 3 hours before exercising.

It’s just as important to have a healthy diet as it is to exercise.

**Exercise tips**

You may find it hard to be more active at first, but as time goes on it’ll get easier as your body gets used to activity. You may only notice small improvements, but it all adds up.

Here are our top tips to get you started:

* Breathe – remember to breathe deeply throughout an activity to keep oxygen coming into your body and to help keep your blood pressure under control.
* Be sociable - go for a walk with a friend, join a group or get active for charity to meet like-minded people and have fun.
* Keep an eye on your progress - many smart phones count the number of steps you walk each day or time how long it takes you to swim a lap of the pool. Challenging yourself and getting better at an activity is fun.
* Make exercise part of your day - plan a time to do some physical activity that fits in with the rest of your day like by walking or cycling instead of driving. It could even be something as small as parking your car further from the shop or getting off the bus a stop early. If you miss a day, do not worry - just make sure you start again when you can.
* Keep moving - everyday activities count, so look out for opportunities to be active during the day while you're inside or outdoors. Whilst moving, don’t change position too quickly as this can cause dizziness.
* Start small - try breaking down your exercise into short sessions throughout the day and build up from there. You could start by taking a five minute walk every day or trying a 10-minute workout.
* Set realistic goals – setting goals like doing a short walk outside every day is fun and makes you feel great when you achieve them.
* Set reminders where you can see them – stick post-it notes on the fridge or set daily reminders on your phone so you do not forget (it’s easily done).
* Get variety - make a list of enjoyable activities you can do such as dancing or cycling and do a different activity each week. This way you’re less likely to get bored and lose interest.
* Be proud of yourself - pat yourself on the back when you hit a goal. You’ve looked after your heart and that’s something to be proud of.

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