

PAIN & EXERCISE FACT SHEET

If I have chronic pain, can I exercise?

People living with chronic pain can develop fears about exercise if they believe that “pain means tissue damage”. However, exercise is beneficial for people with chronic pain to reduce disability, pain, and other symptoms.



Over time, inactivity can lead to restrictions in mobility, weakness or tension in muscles, abnormal movement patterns, fatigue, depression, poor sleep—and more pain. Regular exercise reduces nervous system sensitivity, pain, inflammation, and fatigue, and improves sleep, mood, and physical function.

Regular exercise is one of the most effective treatments for chronic pain.

If your chronic pain increases during or after exercise to a level you can't manage, or if you notice new pain when you exercise, you may benefit from specific advice on how to adapt your exercises or manage your pain.

Speak with your healthcare provider or exercise instructor for guidance.

How much exercise should I be getting?

Some exercise is better than none. The greatest health benefits occur when people get 150 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous exercise each week. This is only 2 ½ hours per week. Gradually increase how long and how often you exercise. Get advice from a health care provider or exercise instructor/trainer if pain or other barriers get in your way. Keep in mind the 50% Exercise Guideline to help you progress. (see below)

What is light, moderate, and vigorous exercise?

- **Light intensity:** You should be able to easily talk when doing light exercise.
- **Moderate intensity:** You can talk but not sing when doing moderate exercise.
- **Vigorous intensity:** You will not be able to say more than a few words when doing vigorous exercise.

The 50% Exercise Guideline



If you live with chronic pain, a good starting point is to do 50% of the amount of activity you can do before your pain flares up.

The exercise you choose should match your goal. For example, your long-term goal may be to do a 50 minute exercise class. But, right now doing it for 30 minutes causes your pain to flare up for several hours. Start by cutting back by 50% - do the exercise class for 15 minutes instead of 30 minutes, or do a lighter exercise load (easier variations).

Stay at that level for a few classes, then increase by 10% every few classes. For example, you would increase from 15 minutes to 17 minutes ($15 \times 10\% = 17$). Then, increase another 10% to 19 minutes ($17 \times 10\%$) and so on until you reach your goal of doing the entire 50 minute class.

By giving yourself several days at a new exercise duration or intensity, you will allow your body time to strengthen and adjust to the increased demands.

