



AASPIRE

# Healthcare Toolkit

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## Staying Healthy: Exercise

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# Staying Healthy: Exercise

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## **1 What is this topic about?**

Different sources will tell you different things on how to exercise properly. With so many different activities to choose from, figuring out what to do can be difficult. The most important thing about exercise is just to do it, do it in moderation, and do it regularly.

## **2 What counts as exercise?**

Exercise is anything that makes your heart beat faster, your skin sweat, and your joints and muscles get used. Cardiovascular exercise, like walking, biking, running, and swimming makes your heart beat fast and hard. Resistance exercise like weight lifting, yoga, or pilates puts weight on your muscles, bones, and joints. It's good to get both cardio-vascular and resistance exercise, but it's more important to get any kind of exercise.

Exercise doesn't have to be complicated, or involve special equipment. A 30-minute brisk walk three to four times a week is exercise. If walking doesn't seem to be making your heart pump very fast, try running, or try putting heavy things in a backpack and going for a walk with the extra weight.

Exercise doesn't have to be a "sport." Martial arts or dancing—even dancing by yourself alone in your room as long as it gets your heart beating faster—is exercise. So is walking up and down the stairs in your house over and over. So is bouncing on a trampoline or jumping rope in the yard.

Exercise can be done alone or with other people. Some people like to take classes with others to motivate them to exercise. Others don't want to be watched at all. The important thing is to find an exercise you like to do, and do it regularly.

### **3 How often should I exercise?**

If it's important to exercise regularly, what does "regularly" mean? Different resources have different answers to that question. How much you should exercise will also be different depending on whether you have any exercise goals, for example, if you are trying to lose weight or trying to train for a sports competition. In general, it's good to exercise three to five times per week. You should also take at least one day or two days a week off from heavy exercise.

Livestrong.com has an article on how much exercise to get if you're trying to [lose weight](#). San Diego University has tips on how to know if you are [getting too much](#) exercise. Zenhabits has tips for how to make exercise a [daily habit](#). The US government has recommendations for exercise in the [be active](#) section of fitness.gov

### **4 How do I pick exercises that are right for me?**

Here are some things to think about when picking an exercise:

- Are you physically able to do it well enough so that you can get started? For example, if you haven't exercised in a long time, you might want to

start with walking before you try out running. Pick something that you can succeed at.

- Is it easy to get set up for it and/or get to it? Can you just do it without having to make a lot of difficult arrangements? For example, find something you can do in your home or near where you live or work. Or if you're someone who has trouble with fine motor skills, don't pick something that requires buckling and lacing on a lot of complicated safety equipment—or, pick something with equipment that will do fine motor work for you, like using weight machines instead of free weights.
- Is it in your budget? Some exercises like skiing might require a lot of expensive equipment, while others like walking around the neighborhood with a heavy backpack are free.
- Do you like doing it? This is really important! If you like music and dancing, do that. If you enjoy feeling deep pressure in your muscles and joints, weight training might be perfect. If you love slow-paced things, try yoga; for fast-paced nervous energy burn, try sprinting around the track at the local high school when no one else is using it.

## **5 I don't like or can't do most exercises, what should I do?**

If you really don't like any kind of exercise, at least not well enough to be able to do it regularly, or can't do most regular types of exercises, here are some tips for how to get exercise by doing every day things in creative exercise-focused ways. HappyLists has a list of [20 creative ways](#) to get some quick exercise. Fitwatch.com has a list of 9 ways you can slip exercise into your [daily routine](#).

## **6 Someone else controls my daily schedule, how do I get exercise included?**

If you have a good relationship with the person who makes your schedule and you feel comfortable communicating with him or her, discuss your wish to add a new exercise routine. You can then brainstorm realistic ways that you can fit it into your weekly schedule.

If you don't feel comfortable talking with your caregiver about adding exercise to your schedule, you might ask for help from someone you trust. If you receive disability services, you can bring up your desire to exercise at your person-centered care conference. You may want to talk to someone you trust first and invite him or her to the meeting so that he or she can help advocate for you.

## **7 What changes in my body can I expect if I start exercising more?**

Some people experience a lot of changes in their bodies when they start exercising, while others do not. Changes some people might experience are:

- Weight loss or weight gain
- A change in distribution of muscle and fat
- Differently-shaped muscles or more muscles
- Increased appetite or hunger, particularly after workouts
- More energy
- Normal muscle aches

## **8 Do I need to change anything about my diet if I start exercising?**

Exercising causes sweat, which means you need more fluids to replace the ones you sweat out. If you have trouble remembering to drink fluids, you might want to make a rule that you have to drink at least eight ounces of water before you start exercising and again after you finish exercising. Some people may find exercise increases their appetite and they need a bit more food. However moderate amounts of exercise should not require a big change in diet. If you are doing special physical training—for example, if you want to run marathons—you may need to make changes in your diet. That information is outside the scope of this introductory article.

## **9 How can I make sure I'm safe when I'm exercising?**

There are two big kinds of safety with exercise. One is keeping yourself from getting injured from the exercise. The other is being safe from others while exercising, particularly in public places like parks and gyms. Harvard Medical School has 10 Tips for [Exercising Safely](#). These tips were not written for people on the autism spectrum, so some might make bad assumptions like that "listen to your body" is helpful advice. The University of Chicago has some tips for [keeping safe](#) while walking in the community.

MedlinePlus has a section on [sports safety](#).

## **10 How do I know if I've hurt myself exercising and what might I do about it?**

It is normal to feel some muscle aches after exercising, especially if you haven't been exercising regularly, if you are trying a new exercise, or if you

are pushing yourself to do more than you are used to doing. You can learn more about [managing sore muscles](#) and joint pain from exercise at WebMD.

Sometimes, though, pain can be a sign of an injury. It may be hard for some people on the spectrum to tell the difference between normal soreness and pain from an injury, especially if they have difficulty with body awareness. One way to know that you may have injured yourself is if the pain is keeping you from doing something that you ordinarily can do. For example, it might be normal to have achy legs after running, but you should not have to limp when you walk. Or it may be normal to for your arms to be sore after rowing, but if you could lift them over your head before exercising, you should still be able to lift them over your head afterwards. If you think you may have injured yourself, contact your healthcare provider and ask if you need to come in for an appointment.

MedlinePlus also has a section on [sports injuries](#).

## 11 Links

[DareBee](#) has a large number of exercise routines that can be done for free on your own time. There are short and long routines. There are routines that have RPG-type stories with them to make them more interesting. All of the exercises have instructions drawn in black and white illustrations. General Fitness

- The US government's [fitness site](#) has information and recommendations about exercise.
- A nice [checklist and guide](#) to exercise, both for people just starting out and for people who want to increase their current exercise practice, can be found in this PDF from [health.gov](#).

- [Livestrong.com](#) is a health resource website. The fitness section of this website has a comprehensive list of suggestions, advice, activities, and tools for those who are already active or are wishing to get active.
- [Mayoclinic.com](#) maintains useful and up-to-date information database and tools to help people stay healthy. Their fitness section has articles on a wide range of topics from basic exercise, to exercise for specific conditions.
- [The American Heart Association](#) has fitness recommendations for different ages, and other resources on their website.

### Developing Routines

- 20 ways to get [quick exercise](#)
- 9 ways to slip exercise into your [daily routine](#)
- Tips for making exercise a [daily habit](#)

### Exercise Safety

- MedlinePlus on [sports safety](#) and [sports injuries](#).
- Tips for how to know if you're [exercising too much](#) from San Diego University
- [10 Tips](#) for Exercising Safely from Harvard Medical School
- Tips for [keeping safe while walking](#) from University of Chicago.