

Exercise

For many people with chronic pain, the idea of exercise seems a million miles away. You may find just walking about the house exhausting! We have found that many people with chronic pain used to be very active, and it is really difficult to accept that they can't do what they used to.

If you are struggling with fatigue, the idea of exercise might feel like an impossible dream! But "Exercise" can include any movement and studies have shown that exercise is actually **good** for most people with chronic pain – if it is done in the right way.

Exercise may include daily walks, stretching routines, swimming, yoga, tai chi, Pilates and other low-impact exercise programmes.

The benefits of exercise

We are forever being told that exercise is good for our health, so I am sure that you don't need us to tell you that! But you may not know that exercise has some particular benefits that can really help people with chronic pain.

- **Helps fight pain** – exercise boosts levels of natural endorphins, which are the pain-fighting molecules that may be responsible for the well-known "runner's high". These endorphins also help to reduce anxiety, stress and depression.
- **Helps keep us calm** –exercise boost Serotonin which is an important substance that helps to keep our mood stable and helps us feel positive and calm.
- **Boosts alertness** - Studies have also shown that exercise triggers the release of adrenaline and noradrenaline, hormones that are known to boost alertness. It also helps to reduce stress.
- **Improving sleep** - Physical activity improves sleep quality and increases sleep duration. Exercise may also bolster sleep in other ways, because it reduces stress and tires you out. Early morning and afternoon exercise may also help reset the sleep wake cycle, although exercising too late will keep you awake!
- **Preventing muscle pain** – weak muscles will hurt when we use them, so if you haven't done much exercise for a while, even everyday activities can hurt. Doing some form of exercise strengthens our muscles and actually prevents them from hurting so much.
- **Reduces fatigue** – it might sound strange that exercise can make you LESS tired, but research has shown that keeping active actually reduces fatigue.



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What sort of exercise is good?

I hope that you will have understood by now that we are not suggesting you push through your pain and we definitely don't want you to start exercising in a way that will flare up your pain and fatigue!



Whatever you decide to do, start VERY slowly and gently. There is no exercise that is particularly harmful for people with chronic pain, but anything that you do that is different to your normal movement is likely to cause your over-sensitive brain to react! So choose something that is really easy to begin with. What you do will depend on what is manageable for you.

Remember that using muscles you haven't used for a while will hurt! That is the same for everyone. So it may be that you have a bit of extra muscle soreness, but this should pass.

The key aim with exercise is consistency. Doing 5 minutes a day is better than doing an hour a week. You can build up from 5 minutes in very small amounts. It is also important to find something you enjoy. You could make going for a walk more enjoyable by going with a friend, or combining it with developing your photography skills, for example.

Some people find that Yoga, Tai Chi and Pilates can be really helpful but, like everything, start off very slowly. If you attend a class, make sure the teacher knows you have chronic pain. They may be able to adapt some of the workout for you. Exercising in a warm pool is also often found to help. If you find the public pool too cold, noisy or busy, there are some local private pools that owners allow people to book for private sessions.

EXAMPLE

Jenny would like to go swimming. She used to be a good swimmer but she hasn't been for 3 years due to pain and fatigue. She is worried about not coping with it and getting frustrated because she can't do what she used to. She decides to ask a friend to go with her to drive her there, to help her get dressed afterwards and also to help her feel more confident. She makes a plan to go and spends just 15 minutes in the pool. She sits on the side to rest before getting showered and changed.

For ideas about exercise and some exercise routines you may like to try, look at www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-fitness-studio where there are a range of routines for pain conditions.

Over to You

What types of exercise are you doing at the moment?

What would you like to do? (realistically!)

What is stopping you?

What could you do to overcome the barriers?

Look at the hand out on Values and Goals and write a goal related to exercise.
