

Physical activity - how to get started

If you are new to exercise or are coming back from a long period of inactivity, there are things you should do to make sure that your exercise program is effective and brings benefits, not injury or pain.

Pre-exercise screening

Pre-exercise screening is used to identify people with medical conditions that may put them at a higher risk of a health problem during physical activity. It is a filter or 'safety net' to help decide if the potential benefits of exercise outweigh the risks for you. Print a copy of the pre-exercise screening tool and discuss it with your doctor or exercise professional.

You may need to visit your doctor

If you answer 'yes' to some of the questions from the adult pre-exercising screening tool, you should see a doctor first. These questions include:

1. Has your doctor ever told you that you have a heart condition or have you ever suffered a stroke?
2. Do you ever experience unexplained pains in your chest at rest or during physical activity and exercise?
3. Do you ever feel faint or have spells of dizziness during physical activity and exercise that causes you to lose balance?
4. Have you had an asthma attack requiring immediate medical attention at any time over the last 12 months?
5. If you have diabetes (type I or type II), have you had trouble controlling your blood glucose in the last three months?
6. Do you have any diagnosed muscle, bone or joint problems that you have been told could be made worse by participating in physical activity or exercise?
7. Do you have any other medical condition(s) that may make it dangerous for you to participate in physical activity or exercise?

Setting goals for physical activity

Setting goals gives you something to work towards and provides you with a way to measure how well you are doing over a period of time. When it comes to succeeding at your exercise program, setting goals and monitoring your progress will help you stay on track and get you to where you want to go.

One of the first steps is to identify why your health is important to you. Ask yourself what you want to get out of becoming more active. Think about the benefits you want to experience if you choose to be more active, as well as the barriers that are holding you back. It may be helpful to make a list of the pros and cons. Which barriers do you feel strongest about? What are the benefits that you want to experience?

Start physical activity gently

If you are currently inactive or feel your fitness level is low, it is highly recommended that you consult a health or exercise professional before commencing activity. Otherwise, start gently with a short session of an activity that you feel you can manage. Build your confidence and fitness level with a number of short sessions.

Exercise progression is unique to every person, so if you have not exercised for some time, you should progress slowly. Increase the length and the intensity of your exercise session gradually. Don't push yourself straightaway. Injury or discomfort can occur and this may reduce your motivation levels.

Stretching, warm up and cool down

As the name suggests, the warm-up is designed to increase your body's internal temperature and warm your muscles to prevent muscle strains and joint sprains. The best way is to start off at a leisurely pace, and then pick up speed. Usually a five to 10-minute warm-up is all you'll need, but this will vary from person to person and if the weather is cold.

For the last five minutes of your exercise, slow down and allow your body to cool down gradually, letting your heart rate and breathing rate come back to normal.

Stretching suggestions

Stretching should be part of your warm-up and cool-down routines. Stretching can help prepare your body and mind for exercise. Recent research suggests that including dynamic stretching in your warm up, which focuses on the muscles you are about to use, is probably best.

Wear comfortable clothes and shoes

Make sure you have comfortable clothing, a suitable pair of shoes and water (sunscreen and a hat if you are outside). Your shoes should provide good support and the best type will depend on the activity you are doing. The wrong type of shoe may cause foot pain or blisters.

Getting the technique right

If you are trying something new, or getting back into an activity you have not done for a while, it might pay to get some coaching or expert instruction. Depending on the activity, incorrect or poor technique may lead to injury or soreness.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Physiotherapist
- Exercise physiologist
- Registered personal trainer

Things to remember

- If you haven't exercised for a while, see your doctor and complete an adult pre-exercise screening questionnaire before starting an exercise program.
- Warming up before exercise is a good way to reduce the risk of injury and to prepare yourself physically as well as mentally for activity.
- Concentrate on warming up the specific muscle groups you will be using in your exercise and include dynamic flexibility exercises.
- It is important to cool down after exercise.

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Fitness Australia

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