PAIN & EXERCISE FACT SHEET

If I have chronic pain, should I exercise?

Regular exercise is helpful for people with chronic pain to reduce disability, pain, inflammation, and nervous system sensitivity.

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

How much exercise should I be getting?

Some exercise is better than none. The greatest health benefits occur when you get 150 minutes or more of moderate exercise each week. You may need to start much lower, by breaking up the amount of time you sit or lie down during the day. Gradually increase how long and how often you exercise or move. Get advice from a healthcare provider or exercise instructor/trainer if pain or other barriers get in your way. Keep in mind the 50% Exercise Guideline (below) to help you progress.

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, get advice from your healthcare providers or exercise instructor on how to modify your activities so you can move more comfortably.

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 goals. For example, your long-term goal may be to walk for 60 minutes. But, right now walking for 30 minutes causes your pain to flare up for several hours or days. Start by cutting back to 50% of the time — walk for 15 instead of 30 minutes. Cutting back to 50% may include cut backs in the amount of time, the intensity (speed or range), or load (weight) of an exercise.

Stay at that reduced level for a few days, then increase by 5—10%. For example, you would increase from 15 minutes to 16 or 17 minutes (15 + 10% = 16.5). Then, increase another 10% to 19 minutes after several days. Continue gradually adding to your exercise until you reach your goal of walking for 60 minutes.

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