



Living with HIV

HIV and Exercise

Regardless of your HIV status, exercise is one of the keys to good overall health. You don't need to go to a gym or buy special clothes or fancy equipment to exercise. Making the time to get some physical activity most days is an important part of a healthy lifestyle.

What are the benefits of exercise?

The benefits of exercise include the following:

- Increased bone strength and muscle mass
- Increased endurance
- Better control of blood sugar and blood fat levels
- Better cognitive function
- Improved mood and mental health
- Better sleep
- Higher energy level
- Improved sexual desire and function.

Along with a balanced diet, getting enough physical activity can help you maintain a healthy weight, and it may help reduce the accumulation of visceral fat within the abdomen.

Physical activity also reduces the risk of comorbidities that occur at higher rates in people living with HIV, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer. Exercise and weight loss can help improve fatty liver disease, which can lead to cirrhosis and liver cancer.

What kind of exercise is best?

Generally speaking, there are two types of exercise:

- Aerobic exercise gets your heart pumping and your breathing rate up. This type of exercise burns fat and improves cardiovascular function. Examples include walking, hiking (especially with hills), running, bicycling, swimming and skating.

- Strength training exercise tones and strengthens muscles. Examples include weight lifting, using resistance bands and doing exercises such as push-ups, sit-ups, pull-ups and leg squats.

It's helpful to pick a type of exercise you enjoy. The goal is to find activities that fit into your daily life so you're motivated to do them regularly. Some people prefer to start their day with exercise in the morning, while others prefer to exercise at night. Many people enjoy participating in team sports, while others prefer solo activities.

Yoga, Pilates, tai chi and qi gong—which promote strength, balance and flexibility—can be good options, especially for people who are older or have physical limitations. Classes are often available online. Try varying your activities to prevent boredom. Take advantage of the weather and the seasons—for example, swim in the summer, ski in the winter and work out at the gym when it's raining. Remember, everyday activities such as walking the dog, gardening and dancing contribute to your total weekly physical activity.

How often should I exercise?

Federal guidelines recommend at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity or 75 minutes of vigorous activity per week as well as strength training activities at least two days per week. It is better to spread this activity over multiple days—for example, a half hour of moderate exercise five days a week—rather than doing it all at once.

The overall goal, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is to move more and sit less throughout the day. People who do any amount of moderate to vigorous physical activity gain health benefits. Add more activity to your day by taking the stairs instead of the elevator or parking farther away from your destination and walking part of the way. If exercising is difficult due to physical limitations, even a small amount of activity is better than none.

How do I start an exercise program?

Before starting a new exercise regimen, check with your health care provider, especially if you are older or have underlying health conditions. Almost everyone can find a level and type of activity that is safe and beneficial for them.

If you're just starting out, build up slowly—for example, by bicycling several more minutes each day or lifting a bit more weight each time you work out. Joining a gym or taking a class offer access to equipment you don't have at home and can motivate you to exercise regularly. Community gyms, such as the YMCA, may offer free or low-cost memberships. A personal trainer or fitness coach can help design an exercise program that's right for you.

Exercise is generally safe, but it's important to know your limits. Overtraining can lead to muscle pain and fatigue, and pushing yourself too hard—for example, lifting too much weight or not paying attention to your form and posture—can increase the risk of injury. If you're not feeling well, skip a day or more.

If you're just starting to exercise, take it slow and increase your activity gradually. To reduce the risk of injury, stretch and warm up at the beginning of every exercise session.

Don't forget to get enough sleep, eat a healthy diet and drink plenty of water before, during and after exercising. Listen to your body: It will tell you when you can step up the pace or need to slow down or take a break.

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