The Benefits of Exercise for People with Heart Disease

Your heart is a muscle that needs regular exercise. When you exercise, your heart has to pump blood faster to get it to your muscles and lungs, and this makes your heart stronger over time. Regular exercise will improve your recovery and future health. To get the most benefit from exercise, work with your doctor or therapist to create an exercise plan.

Benefits of Exercise

Exercise helps your body to:

- Lower the risk of having another cardiovascular event.
- Lower blood pressure. This lasts 12 to 24 hours.
- Lower blood sugar levels. This can last up to 48 hours.
- Burn calories, which helps reduce weight. Being overweight is linked to type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high total cholesterol, bad cholesterol called LDL and triglycerides that can harm your heart.
- May raise good cholesterol called HDL while lowering total cholesterol.
- Improve circulation to prevent blockage in leg arteries called peripheral vascular disease.
- Increase energy. Your daily routine becomes easier when you exercise regularly.
- Lower stress levels.

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Types of Exercise

There are different types of exercise that are good for your health. Vary the type of exercise you do to increase the health benefits and prevent boredom and injury.

Aerobic Exercise

Aerobic exercises move large muscles and improve the health of your heart and lungs, such as walking, jogging, aerobic classes, biking, swimming, rowing, or cross country skiing.

For most people with heart failure, it is best to avoid weight lifting and isometric exercises. Examples of isometric exercises are pushing, pulling, lifting, and carrying. These types of exercises can raise your blood pressure and put more strain on your heart.

Strength Training Exercise

Strength training exercises increase strength and build strong bones and muscles. Weight lifting, push-ups and sit-ups are examples of strength training. Talk to your doctor before beginning strength training if you have high blood pressure or other health problems.

Stretching Exercise

Stretching exercises increase the length of the muscles, which improves balance and joint health.

- Stretching is important before and after exercising and as an exercise itself. Examples include yoga and tai chi.
- Do at least a 5 minute warm up such as walking before stretching to reduce risk of muscle strain.
- Hold each stretch for 20 to 30 seconds.

If You Have Heart Failure

Aerobic exercise and stretching are still important if you have heart failure. Avoid weight lifting and strength training, also called isometric exercises. Examples of isometric exercises are pushing, pulling, lifting, and carrying. These types of exercises can raise your blood pressure and put more strain on your heart.
Getting Started

- Talk to your doctor about what type and how much exercise is right for you before starting any exercise program.

- When starting an exercise program, the goal is to **slowly** improve your heart and lungs. There are three things to keep in mind as you start to exercise:
  - How hard you exercise, known as intensity.
  - How often you exercise, called frequency.
  - How long you exercise, also called duration of exercise.

- You want to exercise enough to benefit your heart but without straining. Do not push too hard but pay attention to how your body feels. You are working too hard, if you have trouble breathing or you feel weak, faint or dizzy during or after exercising.

- Frequency is important. For example, start with 2 to 3 short walks each day for 10 minutes. As you are able to walk for longer periods of time, you may cut down on the number of times you walk each day. It is best if you can exercise at least 5 days each week.

- How long you exercise may start as only a few minutes. Add a few minutes each day. A goal over time is to be able to exercise for 30 to 60 minutes.

- Begin and end with 5 minutes of gentle, stretching exercises or use this time to slowly increase or decrease the exercise. For example, walk 5 minutes before and after jogging. Warming up also helps prevent irregular heartbeats and injuries, and decreases strain on the heart.

- Exercise at a comfortable pace. Prevent injury by slowly build up your level of activity over weeks. Listen to your body for early warning pains in joints, feet, ankles or legs.

- Drink water before, during, and after exercise. Your body needs water.

- Cooling down helps prevent strain on the heart, large drops in blood pressure and lightheadedness.

- Read the handout, **The Do’s and Don’ts of Exercise**, for more information.
Rate of Perceived Exertion (RPE) Scale

The RPE scale tells staff how hard an exercise feels to you. Perceived exertion is the amount of effort and physical fatigue you feel. A number 6 is the lightest level of activity. Exertion at this level could be done all day without much effort. The number 20 means a level of exercise that you cannot continue. Aim for a perceived exertion of 11 to 14 during exercise.

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Rest and Saving Energy

With heart problems, you may feel tired even before you exercise. Talk with your doctor about how to balance exercise and your activity. Read the handout, Plan to Simplify Work. You may need to cut back on some activity until your condition is under control. Get enough rest to avoid getting tired.

Exercise Tips

To put less stress on your heart and get the benefits of exercise:

- Exercise after a rest period, not when you are tired from other activities.
- In hot or humid weather, exercise in the morning or evening when it is cooler.
In cold weather, cover your nose and mouth with a scarf.

Walk in a mall or fitness center when the temperature is above 85 degrees Fahrenheit. This is also a good idea when the temperature is cold, below 32 degrees.

Wear loose, comfortable clothing when you are exercise. Wear light layers that you can put on or take off as you warm up or cool down.

Exercise with a friend or family member. It can be more fun to exercise with someone and you can help keep each other motivated to exercise.

**Warning signs that you are exercising too hard**

If you experience any of these warning signs, you are exercising too hard. Stop exercising and rest! Talk to your doctor, nurse or cardiac rehab therapist if you have any of these signs:

- Pain or pressure in your chest, down your arms or shoulders, or in your throat or jaw
- Irregular, skipped, or fast heart beats
- Extreme fatigue or shortness of breath
- Blurred vision
- Sudden weakness in face, arm or leg
- Severe leg pain with exercise
- Lightheadedness, dizziness or confusion
- Consistent sore muscles

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.