

**How to**  
improve your wellbeing  
through physical activity  
and sport



how to



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and sport

# **How to improve your wellbeing through physical activity and sport**

This booklet is for anyone who wants to improve their wellbeing by being more active through sport or exercise.

It covers how being active is important for our physical and mental health, and explores which sports or exercise may be best for you, how to overcome common barriers, potential risks and how to plan your routine safely.

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## Why does being active matter?

We all know that being physically active is good for our bodies. But our physical health and mental health are closely linked – so physical activity can be very beneficial for our mental health and wellbeing too.

Lots of us don't get enough exercise to stay healthy, but physical activity is particularly important if you have a mental health problem. This is because people with mental health problems are more likely to have a poor diet, smoke or drink too much alcohol, or be overweight/obese (this can be a side effect of taking medication).

So if you have a mental health problem, the health benefits of becoming more physically active are even more significant.

## What does being physically active mean?

We all have different reasons for being active. The types of activity we do usually fall under these headings:

- **Physical activity.** This can describe anything we do that involves moving our bodies.
- **Exercise.** Any physical activity could be considered exercise, but when we talk about doing exercise we usually mean activities we do deliberately for fitness or training, rather than something that's part of our daily routine.
- **Sport.** Sport usually refers to physical activities we do on our own or in a team for competition or fun. People working in the sport and leisure industries use the word in its broadest sense, including activities such as tennis, athletics, swimming, keep-fit or Zumba classes. Some sports such as snooker or darts are more about skill than any physical exertion (Sport England, the national body responsible for increasing access to sport, has an extensive list of sports on its website, see 'Useful contacts' on p.30).

## Does mental health impact on physical conditions?

Having a mental health problem can put us at even higher risk of developing serious physical health problems than other people. Those of us with a mental health problem are:

- twice as likely to die from heart disease
- four times as likely to die from respiratory disease
- on average, likely to die between 10 and 17 years earlier than the general population, if we have schizophrenia or bipolar disorder (this may be due to a number of factors including suicide, poor diet, exercise and social conditions. People may also be slower at seeking help, while doctors can sometimes fail to spot physical health problems in people with severe mental health problems).

If you have a long-term physical health condition it can also put you at risk of developing a mental health problem such as anxiety or depression. For some people, the impact on your mental health could become more of a problem than the physical condition itself. Exercise programmes and other treatments like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and mindfulness have been shown to improve anxiety and depression, and quality of life for people with chronic illnesses.

### Disability sport and inclusive sport

You might consider your mental health problem to be a disability, or you might not. If you are disabled, you might be even less likely to do any sport as a physical activity – only 1 in 6 disabled people play a sport regularly compared to 1 in 3 non-disabled people. But many of the bodies that oversee particular sports (for example The Football Association or Lawn Tennis Association – see 'Useful Contacts' on p.29) provide tailored opportunities for disabled people to enjoy sport, whatever your level of ability. This includes people with mental health problems.

## What are the health benefits of physical activity?

Physical activity has a wide range of health benefits – for your mind and body, and for your social and emotional wellbeing.

### Physical health benefits

As well as improving your overall physical fitness, being more active can have the following physical benefits:

- **Reduced risk of some diseases.** For example, health experts suggest that being more active can reduce your risk of developing a stroke or heart disease by 10%, and type 2 diabetes by 30–40%.
- **Reduced risk of physical health problems as our bodies adapt to stress.** As we become fitter, our bodies can better regulate our cortisol levels. Cortisol is a 'stress hormone' that our bodies release in response to anxiety; over prolonged periods, higher cortisol levels have been linked to a wide range of health problems including heart disease, high blood pressure, a lowered immune response, as well as depression and anxiety.
- **Healthier organs.** When you're active your body is working more, which is good for your organs. For example, a stronger heart will help you have lower cholesterol and lower blood pressure.
- **Healthier bones.** Weight-bearing exercises will strengthen your bones and build your muscle, which can reduce your chances of developing osteoporosis.

- **Healthier weight.** If you're overweight, becoming more active can help you start to reduce body fat as your stamina and fitness levels improve.
- **More energy.** As your body adapts to increased activity levels you get a natural energy boost, which can make you feel less tired. Researchers say that even low intensity levels of activity can be beneficial if you usually feel very fatigued.
- **Improved sleep.** Many people find they are able to sleep better at night after having been more active during the day.

●● *Cycling helped me lose weight and I feel better about myself. But after being active for a few days I need a good sleep. That's important too!* ●●

### Increasing your body's tolerance to stress

Exercise itself is a stressor, i.e. something that makes your body produce the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline. Making yourself experience stress on purpose by doing regular exercise forces your body to adapt as it becomes more active, so you build up a resilience over time. But it's important to pace yourself and not work your body too hard, because experiencing stress like this could become harmful over prolonged periods.

### Mental health benefits

- **Reduced anxiety and happier moods.** When you exercise, your brain chemistry changes through the release of endorphins (sometimes called 'feel good' hormones), which can calm anxiety and lift your mood.
- **Reduced feelings of stress.** You may experience reductions in feelings of stress and tension as your body is better able to control cortisol levels.
- **Clearer thinking.** Some people find that exercise helps to break up racing thoughts. As your body tires so does your mind, leaving you calmer and better able to think clearly.
- **A greater sense of calm.** Simply taking time out to exercise can give you space to think things over and help your mind feel calmer.
- **Increased self-esteem.** When you start to see your fitness levels increase and your body improve, it can give your self-esteem a big boost. The sense of achievement you get from learning new skills and achieving your goals can also help you feel better about yourself and lift your mood. Improved self-esteem also has a protective effect that increases life satisfaction and can make you more resilient to feeling stressed.
- **Reduced risk of depression.** If you're more active there's good evidence to suggest that at most ages, for both men and women, there's a trend towards lower rates of depression. In fact one study has found that by increasing your activity levels from doing nothing to exercising at least three times a week, you can reduce your risk of depression by almost 20%.



### Exercise as a treatment for depression

If you have a diagnosis of mild to moderate depression, your GP might suggest you do some exercise to help lift your mood. This is because exercise can be a more effective treatment than taking antidepressants. Your GP might even give you a prescription for exercise, and refer you to a programme at a local gym or health centre.

In exercise treatment programmes the sessions usually last from 45 minutes to 1 hour, and you'd be invited to attend at least three times a week over a 10–14 week period. This is because exercise is thought to be most effective if you're able to manage the equivalent of five 30-minute sessions of moderate intensity activity each week (the same as the current NHS guidelines for healthy physical activity). It's also more likely to work for you if you choose exercise that you find enjoyable and that gives you a sense of accomplishment.

👉👉 *Running helped with my depression loads; I can run with my music and get away from everything that bothers me.* 👉👉

### Social and emotional benefits

- **Making friends and connecting with people.** Being around people is good for our mental health and social networks – plus you can maximise the benefits of exercising by doing it with other people. You may find that the social benefits are just as important as the physical ones.
- **Having fun.** Lots of us enjoy being active because it's fun. Researchers have shown that there's a link between the things we enjoy doing and improvements in our wellbeing overall. If you enjoy an activity you're also more likely to keep doing it.
- **Challenging stigma and discrimination.** Some people find that joining a sport programme helps reduce the stigma attached to their mental health problem. Getting involved in local projects with other people who share a common interest can be a great way to break down barriers and challenge discrimination.

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## Which activity is best for me?

Having a clear idea about what you want to achieve should help you to make a decision about which activity to choose. For example, you could think about which of these factors are most important for you:

- meeting new people and making friends
- learning a new skill
- managing your weight
- making your lifestyle more active or improving your physical fitness
- giving your mental health a boost
- playing a team sport or exercising on your own
- being in an outdoor or indoor space
- ease of access – for example if you have limited physical mobility, or can't afford certain classes or equipment
- doing something you enjoy

## How can I compare different activities?

This section provides key details on various physical activities to help you think about which might suit you best. You might be able to think of lots of other advantages and disadvantages to different activities that aren't listed here, but this section should provide a good starting point. For an explanation of how impact and intensity affect your body, see p.15.

### Chair-based activities

Impact: Very low

Intensity: Light

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Very good if you have very low fitness levels</li><li>• Improves mobility – can help you maintain a range of motion</li><li>• Some strength benefits</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Limited cardiovascular benefits</li></ul>

## Yoga

Impact: Low

Intensity: Light

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be relaxing</li> <li>• Improves your core stability, mobility and flexibility</li> <li>• Improves breathing techniques and your posture</li> <li>• Women-only sessions available</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited cardiovascular benefits</li> <li>• Some positions may be challenging</li> </ul>

## Pilates

Impact: Low

Intensity: Light to moderate

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be relaxing</li> <li>• Improves your core stability, mobility and flexibility</li> <li>• Improves breathing techniques and your posture</li> <li>• Women-only sessions available</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited cardiovascular benefits</li> <li>• Some positions may be challenging</li> </ul>

## Gardening

Impact: Low

Intensity: Light to moderate

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some cardiovascular benefits</li> <li>• Improves your flexibility, mobility and strength</li> <li>• Can be relaxing</li> <li>• Mental health benefits associated with green space</li> <li>• Can be a group or lone activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weather can be a barrier</li> <li>• Activity cycles are seasonal so tends to drop off in winter</li> <li>• You need access to a garden and equipment</li> </ul>

### Walking

Impact: Low

Intensity: Moderate

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Good cardiovascular benefits</li><li>• Can be a group or lone activity</li><li>• Being outdoors in nature can help lift your mood</li><li>• Free of charge</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• If you're walking outdoors some terrain may pose risks – especially if you're older or less mobile</li><li>• Weather can be a barrier</li></ul>

### Water-based activities

Impact: Low

Intensity: Moderate

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Water can be therapeutic</li><li>• Water buoyancy is helpful if you're overweight or have restricted movement</li><li>• Women-only sessions available</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Some activities exclude non-swimmers</li><li>• Wearing swimwear can be challenging if you have low body confidence</li><li>• Not appropriate if you have a water phobia</li></ul>

👤👤 *Swimming has helped me. The pool is one of my safe places now and I go twice a week. It means that I'm tired at the end of the day so I can sleep much better, and I feel happier about my body.* 👤👤

## Exercise to music

Impact: Low or high depending on class or style

Intensity: Moderate to vigorous\*

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improves your cardiovascular fitness, strength and endurance</li> <li>• Can be a group or lone activity</li> <li>• Women-only sessions available</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Challenges your coordination and motor skills, which can be frustrating at first</li> <li>• Music and group exercise or studio environment may be intimidating</li> </ul>

## Team sports

Impact: High

Intensity: Moderate to vigorous depending on activity\*

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most activities good for cardiovascular fitness</li> <li>• Good for building social networks</li> <li>• Builds teamwork skills</li> <li>• Promotes a sense of belonging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Joining a team may be difficult if you are uncomfortable being in a group</li> </ul>

\* Some team sports may involve varying degrees of intensity, for example cricket and softball. Some types of exercise to music will differ, for example Zumba Gold is a much gentler form of dance compared to Zumba Circuits.

### Running

Impact: High

Intensity: Moderate to vigorous

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Good for cardiovascular fitness</li><li>• Stamina building</li><li>• Can be a group or lone activity</li><li>• Can be outdoors in nature</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Physical sensations of running could potentially feel like a panic attack</li><li>• Weather can be a barrier</li><li>• Risk of injury, especially to joints and knees, but risks can be minimised with good running shoes</li></ul>

### Gym-based activities

Impact: Low or high depending on activity

Intensity: Light, moderate or vigorous depending on activity

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improves cardiovascular fitness, strength and endurance</li><li>• Being indoors may be more comfortable during bad weather and can feel safer after dark</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Limited flexibility training unless specific activities included</li><li>• Equipment can be intimidating, and could cause injury if used incorrectly</li><li>• Gym environment can be intimidating or boring</li><li>• Membership can be expensive</li></ul>

### Circuit training

Impact: High

Intensity: Vigorous

Advantages	Disadvantages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Improves cardiovascular fitness, strength and endurance</li><li>• A good circuit programme should work every part of your body</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Limited flexibility training unless specific activities included</li><li>• May be seen as 'boot camp'-style exercise, which could feel intimidating</li></ul>

### What does intensity mean?

Your body will feel different depending on the level of intensity and impact of your activity:

**Intensity** (or exertion) refers to how hard your body is working overall (meaning how much stored energy you're using up) and will be different for everyone depending on your fitness levels so as you become fitter, activities will become easier.

How your body may feel when exercising:

- **Light intensity** – breathing and speaking is easy.
- **Moderate intensity** – speaking is easy, but your breathing is deeper and quicker, your heart is beating faster and your body is warming up.
- **Vigorous intensity** – breathing is very hard and you may be short of breath, speaking will be difficult and your heartbeat will feel rapid.

Health care professionals recommend that we aim to do 150 minutes of **moderate intensity** activity each week (see p.26). At first this may be a challenge to those of us new to exercise, so it's really important to pace yourself and build up your fitness levels until you're able to meet the target.

### What does impact mean?

**Low or high impact** refers to the impact of exercise on your cardiovascular system (meaning how hard your heart and lungs are working). Low impact exercises can improve your health and fitness without harming your joints. Higher impact activity usually involves more movement, and both feet being off the ground. This can place more stress on your ankles, knees and other joints when your feet touch the ground (for example when running or jumping).

If you have problems with your joints or ligaments, some activities are low impact, but still have higher intensity benefits. For example, walking and swimming are both low impact, moderate intensity activities which put very little stress on your joints.

## How can I overcome barriers?

We can all face barriers that stop us being active. In this section we've included some common examples with ideas for overcoming them.

### I'm too tired or often have no energy

Having a mental health problem (or taking medication) can make you feel tired, disrupt sleep and drain energy levels. Feeling low can also dampen your desire to do the things you enjoy, which can make it even harder to get up and go.

- **Work with your highs and lows.** For example, if you're not a morning person don't go for early morning sessions, and avoid times when the side effects of your medication may be a problem.
- **Start off small**, and build up your activity levels at a pace that works for you. Even small amounts of activity can give you a natural energy boost – and remember that exercise can help you sleep better.

🎧🎧 *When I'm feeling low, I crank up the music and hit the streets; it stops me heading to a really dark place.* 🎧🎧

### I'm short of time

Not being able to find time to exercise is one of the most common barriers, but there are ways to squeeze it in:

- **Be strategic with your schedule.** Work out what time you have available and find an activity that fits into your schedule; alternatively, build some time into your week where you can do some exercise.
- **Raise your activity levels at home and work**, or when you are out and about. A brisk 15 minute walk to the station or building some extra steps into your day can help.



- **Choose activities with childcare facilities.** Finding time to exercise when you're looking after children can be tough, but many local council leisure centres provide free crèche facilities. Some also allow children to attend certain swimming sessions.
- **Turn exercise into something you really enjoy.** Finding an activity that's fun will mean you're much more likely to make time for it.

### It's too expensive

Buying the right clothes and equipment can be expensive, and might rule out joining a private gym or leisure centre. But you don't have to spend a lot of money to be more active.

- **Look for local schemes and discounts.** Some councils offer discounted leisure centre memberships for people who want to exercise more, especially if you have a health problem or are inactive, so it's well worth checking your council's website. Many local Minds also run physical activity sessions at minimal cost – you can contact your local Mind and ask what they offer (see 'Useful contacts' on p.29).
- **Ask your GP about exercise on prescription.** Your GP might be able to prescribe an exercise programme on the NHS to help you manage your mental health problem. You can ask them if this is an option for you.
- **Find activities you can do for free.** The outdoors can be a great place to boost your activity levels for little cost. With some comfortable footwear, walking and jogging won't cost you anything. Your local park may also host a running group. One example is Parkrun where anyone, regardless of their ability, can complete a weekly 5k run for free (see 'Useful contacts' on p.29).

●● *Parkrun has given me the confidence to really believe in myself and keep my depression at bay.* ●●

### I lack confidence

Trying out something new, travelling to new places, or being with people you don't know can be really daunting at first. But over time, you may find that taking up an activity helps to increase your self-confidence as you become fitter and improve your skills.

- **Ask someone you trust to help you get started.** Some clubs will allow you to attend with a friend or support worker for the first few sessions while you get used to the new surroundings.
- **Look for groups of like-minded people.** Some sport governing bodies provide sessions aimed at people with mental health problems. You'll be joined by people who may have similar problems to you – and sessions are run by people who understand your needs. This can be a great way of boosting your confidence levels.
- **Consider doing an activity on your own.** There's lots of options if you prefer not to exercise with other people. Walking, running or cycling are great exercise; they can help you clear your head and can easily be built into your daily routine.

### I'm embarrassed about my body

Lots of people have worries about their bodies. These feelings can be particularly difficult if a negative body image is part of your mental health problem, or you're taking medication which causes side effects on your body. But this doesn't have to stop you being more active.

- **Try to reassure yourself that you're not alone.** It's important to remember that everybody has to start somewhere and many people will share similar anxieties about their bodies.
- **Find a beginners' class in a friendly environment.** If you're intimidated by gyms, joining a beginners' class at a local community centre or your council leisure centre may be a friendlier option.

- **You could look for women- or men-only sessions.** Many leisure centres and swimming pools run women- or men-only sessions to help support people who feel uncomfortable about attending mixed-gender sessions.

●● *In my aqua classes there are people of all shapes and sizes – and honestly no one cares.* ●●

### **I'm not a sporty person**

You might feel uneasy about exercise classes or the pressure of a gym – or have bad memories of school sports. But being physically active doesn't have to be about high impact sport or exercise – there are lots of activities you can do without having to go near a gym. For example:

- **Green exercise.** Green Gyms (such as those organised by The Conservation Volunteers – see 'Useful contacts' on p.30), gardening projects and environmental volunteering can all get you involved in outdoor conservation or horticultural work with other local people. (See Mind's booklet *Making sense of ecotherapy* for more information about ways to get involved in green exercise.)
- **Walking groups.** For example, Walking for Health offers over 3,000 free short walks every week. You'll be supported by trained volunteers who will guide you through your walk. The walks are short and over easy terrain so are perfect if you're not used to being active (see 'Useful contacts' on p.30).
- **Dance classes** can be a fun alternative to structured exercise and give you all the benefits of a good workout. The popularity of TV dance shows has meant that classes are now more widely available. The NHS Choices website has some useful tips on getting started (see 'Useful contacts' on p.29).

●● *I'm not the sporty type, but I love walking. It really lifts my mood.* ●●

### Stigma stops me in my tracks

You might feel that some people won't understand your needs, or may be judgmental because of your mental health problem. Experiencing stigma can make you feel powerless, but there are things you can do.

- **Look for activities aimed at people with mental health problems.** Some sport and leisure providers are making services more appropriate for people with mental health problems. Our network of local Minds also provides access to different types of physical activities – you can contact your local Mind and ask what they can offer (see 'Useful contacts' on p.29).
- **Support anti-stigma organisations and campaigns.** For example, Time to Change's work with The Football Association has resulted in some high-profile football clubs offering training sessions for people with mental health problems, and our Get Set to Go programme is specifically designed to support people to overcome barriers to being physically active (see 'Useful contacts' on pp.29–30).
- **Encourage your local sport organisations to sign *The Mental Health Charter for Sport and Recreation*.** National sport governing bodies are aware of the need for change and many organisations have already agreed to tackle discrimination on the grounds of mental health by signing the charter. Although it's still early days, Mind will be working to help sport organisations bring about change quickly (for details of the Sport and Recreation Alliance, who Mind is working with, see 'Useful contacts' on p.30).

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## What risks should I consider?

There's no wrong time to start exercising as long as you are physically able. However it's also important to consider any risks, such as if you have a physical health problem, if you're taking medication, experience anxiety or panic attacks, or could be at risk of over exercising.

You might need to take extra care when choosing an activity (see p.10) and planning a safe routine (see p.25).

### Physical Activity Readiness Questionnaires

Some sports clubs, gyms and leisure centres may ask you to complete a short health questionnaire before letting you use the facilities and equipment (often referred to as a PAR-Q, or physical activity readiness questionnaire). Depending on your answers, your club may ask you to have a check-up with your GP before participating in any activities. This may seem overcautious, but making sure you're healthy enough to exercise safely is really important.

### If you have a physical health condition

Some physical conditions can have implications for the type and level of exercise it may be safe for you to do, such as:

- high blood pressure
- heart problems
- diabetes
- chest pains
- pregnancy
- an injury

You may be unaware that you have an underlying health problem – high blood pressure for example has no obvious symptoms. So if you haven't been active for some time, or haven't had a check-up for a while, it's worth talking to your GP before starting a new exercise programme so they can advise on what's safe for you.

### If you're taking medication

Some medication can also have implications for the type and level of exercise it may be safe for you to do. It's important to check with your GP or psychiatrist what level of activity is safe for you, especially if you experience any of the side effects mentioned below:

- **Antidepressants.** Some types of antidepressants can sometimes cause physical side effects, such as dizziness, high or low blood pressure, rapid heartbeat or disturbed heart rhythm.
- **Antipsychotics.** If you're taking antipsychotics you may experience side effects such as muscle spasms, disturbed heart rhythm and palpitations. You may also experience drowsiness, blurred vision or dizziness, which may make it feel difficult to exercise. Weight gain, high blood pressure and raised cholesterol are also common side effects, which can put you at risk of heart disease, stroke and diabetes – so taking regular exercise may be important for looking after your physical health.
- **Beta-blockers** (sometimes used to treat the physical symptoms of anxiety) work by slowing your heart rate and lowering blood pressure, which means your heart will be working harder when exercising. You may need to adjust the intensity and duration of your exercise sessions so you don't become exhausted.
- **Lithium.** It's good to exercise regularly if you're taking lithium, but concentrations of the drug in your blood can increase to harmful levels as you lose fluids (for example by sweating), so it's best to avoid taking your lithium dose immediately before exercising. If you're planning to make a significant change to your activity levels, it's sensible to speak to your GP first – they may check your blood levels and adjust your dosage if necessary.

- **Tranquillisers**, for example benzodiazepines like Diazepam (sometimes used to treat anxiety) work by slowing down your body's functions, so your reaction times may be slower and you may experience drowsiness, dizziness or unsteadiness. This could affect your alertness or increase the risk of getting injured.

Before prescribing you any medication, your GP should explain to you exactly what it's for, and any possible side effects, so that you can make an informed decision. (See Mind's webpages on 'Medication' for more information.)

### If you have anxiety or panic attacks

If you experience anxiety or panic attacks you might find that doing exercise can cause some sensations which may feel like you're having a panic attack, such as raised heart rate, feeling shaky or dizzy, breathlessness or feeling hot. When running, it's also easy to hyperventilate as rapid breathing upsets your body's balance of carbon dioxide and oxygen.

- **Start off slowly.** This may help you spot the difference between physical effects of exercise and those of a panic attack.
- **Take deep, slow breaths.** This may help to reduce the likelihood of you starting to hyperventilate.
- **Avoid triggering situations.** Always try to opt for activities where you can minimise risks. For example if you want to avoid crowds or travelling it might mean you choose to do some jogging or walking at the local park rather than heading for a busy gym.

(See Mind's booklet *Understanding anxiety and panic attacks* for more information.)

### If you could be at risk of over exercising

Exercising is usually a beneficial thing to do for your mental health, and can be helpful as part of a long-term recovery or treatment plan. But there are some situations in which you might need to take extra care in case it starts to become a problem for you.

- **If you have an eating problem.** If you experience an eating problem such as anorexia, it may be tempting to over exercise as a way of controlling your weight or burning calories after eating.
- **If you have compulsive or addictive feelings about exercise.** If your exercising is starting to take over your life – for example if you feel anxious if you miss a session, or if it's becoming more important than work, family or friends – you could be developing an exercise or training compulsion (sometimes called an exercise addiction). Having an exercise compulsion can be a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and can often accompany an eating problem.

(See Mind's booklet *Understanding eating problems* for more information about treatment and support for eating problems.)

### The risks of over exercising

Over exercising can be very harmful for your physical health:

- Excessive exercise can damage tendons, ligaments, bones, cartilage and joints, and when minor injuries aren't allowed to heal, this can result in long-term damage.
- Instead of building muscle, exercising too much destroys muscle mass, especially if your body isn't getting enough nutrition, forcing it to break down muscle for energy. This can become life threatening.



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## How can I plan a safe routine?

When you're starting an exercise routine, you'll be more likely to stay motivated, enjoy it and keep it going if you consider the following issues.

### Getting started

If you haven't been active for some time, doing too much exercise at first will make you feel tired and may put you off. When you're just starting out, it's helpful to bear the following in mind:

- **Choose an exercise or sport that you really enjoy.** Don't feel that you have to stick at something that's not working for you. There are hundreds of activities you can do and you're much more likely to keep doing it if it's fun.
- **Have realistic expectations.** If you used to be active in the past remember that age and inactivity can take its toll on fitness levels, so have some realistic expectations about what you can do when you first start.
- **Try to build more activity naturally into your daily routine.** For example:
  - take the stairs instead of the lift
  - walk or cycle to work instead of driving or getting the bus (if it's too far, see if you can walk or cycle for at least part of the journey)
  - leave the car at home, walk the children to school and jog home.
- **Be patient**, and gradually increase the intensity of your exercise as your body adjusts.

👉👉 *So many people force themselves to do stuff they don't enjoy for the health benefits. But they usually give up instead of finding the thing they love and can't get enough of.* 👉👉

### How regularly should I exercise?

To stay healthy the NHS says that adults should do 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity every week. That's roughly 30 minutes of activity on at least five days, or smaller chunks of activity spread more frequently over the week.

This might be beyond the reach of many of us, particularly older or less mobile people. But health professionals agree that even a small amount of physical activity is better than none. Try not to worry too much about meeting this target – but aim to get started by building activity into your daily routine and then work your way up.

## Looking after yourself

### Warming up

Warming up before your main activity is an important part of a session – it helps your body prepare for activity by raising your heart rate and increasing blood flow to your muscles, which can help to prevent injury and discomfort. A good 10-minute warm up could include:

- some cardiovascular exercise such as marching on the spot or jogging
- some gentle stretching once your pulse has increased and your muscles are feeling warm (you should never stretch a muscle that's been resting as this can cause injury).

### Cooling down

Cooling down after your main activity should also be a key part of your session – this means keeping the movement going but reducing the intensity of your activity to help your body move from being active to resting. Cooling down properly can help prevent:

- feeling dizzy or light-headed after exercising
- aches and pains the next day.

A 10-minute cool down is usually enough time to allow your breathing rate to return to normal and for your body to feel less hot.

### Listening to your body

When exercising, it's important to listen to the signals that your body is sending you. These can tell you if you're pushing yourself too hard. For example:

- Feeling that your muscles are working or slight muscle soreness the next day is normal and shows that exercises are working.
- If your muscles feel very sore it might mean you're doing too much too soon. You may need to reduce the intensity of your sessions and make sure you're doing a correct warm up and cool down.
- If you experience chest pain, dizziness or severe shortness of breath, stop immediately and contact your GP. Call an ambulance if you feel very unwell and your symptoms do not go away when you stop exercising.

### Keeping hydrated

When exercising, you can lose up to a litre of fluid in an hour depending on how long and how hard you're working. You will lose fluid through sweating and in the air that you breathe out. If you don't keep your fluid levels topped up, you will quickly become dehydrated, which can affect your health and ability to continue exercising. It's really important to make sure you get the right amount of fluid before, during and after exercise.

### Taking care in the sun

Remember to use a good sunscreen if you're planning on being outside for any length of time, especially on a bright day. Some types of medication can make your skin more sensitive to sunlight so that you burn more easily; in this case you'll need to use an even higher factor sunscreen and take extra care.

## Keeping it going

When you're feeling low it can be difficult to stay motivated so it's worth thinking about some options you can use when you need that bit of extra inspiration. For example:

- **Involve a friend.** Having a buddy to exercise with can be a great way of keeping you motivated.
- **Develop your support networks.** Our network of local Minds and our Elefriends online community can be great places to develop supportive networks. You could link up with people in your area who have similar experiences (see 'Useful contacts' opposite).
- **Set realistic goals and reward yourself as you meet them.** Don't forget to step up your challenges as you work towards your 150 minutes per week.
- **Keep an activity log to track your progress.** Think about how your activity is helping you meet any physical, mental and social goals. This can be a powerful way of remembering the highs – and may help you work out how to avoid the lows.
- **Use technology to help.** If you have a smart phone there are lots of apps that can help motivate you. For example, the NHS Choices' Couch to 5K app is free and aims to get you running 5K within nine weeks. If you don't have a smart phone, the NHS Choices website also has Couch to 5K podcasts to motivate you (see 'Useful contacts' opposite).
- **Have a back-up option.** There may be times when you can't exercise so it's a good idea to have an alternative option that will help lift your mood. For example mindfulness can be a great accompaniment to any exercise routine.

●● *Exercise has certainly helped with my depression. I love setting myself a target then getting out there and achieving it.* ●●

## Useful contacts

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### Mind Infoline

tel: 0300 123 3393

Open from 9am to 6pm,  
Monday to Friday.

text: 86463

email: [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)

web: [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)

Our Infoline offers mental health information and support. We can provide details of Mind's Legal Line, and help you find local services near you.

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### Elefriends

web: [elefriends.org.uk](http://elefriends.org.uk)

A supportive online community which provides online peer support for anyone experiencing a mental health problem.

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### The Football Association

web: [thefa.com](http://thefa.com)

The governing body for football in England. Has worked with Time to Change to develop amateur football projects for people with mental health problems.

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### Get Set to Go

web: [mind.org.uk/sport](http://mind.org.uk/sport)

Mind's England-only programme that aims to support people with mental health problems to take up a sport or physical activity.

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### Lawn Tennis Association

web: [lta.org.uk](http://lta.org.uk)

The body that oversees the promotion and development of tennis in the UK. Encourages uptake of tennis at all levels including initiatives for disabled people.

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### NHS Choices

web: [nhs.uk](http://nhs.uk)

Online information on a wide range of health-related information, including resources on exercise, Couch to 5K, diet and healthy living.

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### Parkrun

web: [parkrun.org.uk](http://parkrun.org.uk)

Organises free, weekly, 5km timed runs across the UK. They are open to everyone, free of charge, and are safe and easy to take part in.

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### Sport and Recreation Alliance (SRA)

web: [sportandrecreation.org.uk](http://sportandrecreation.org.uk)  
Umbrella organisation for the governing and representative bodies of sport and recreation in the UK. Together with the Professional Players Federation they have developed *The Mental Health Charter for Sport and Recreation*.

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### Sport England

web: [sportengland.org](http://sportengland.org)  
Works to help people and communities across the country create sporting habits for life. Has a role in funding and supporting disability sport.

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### State of Mind

web: [stateofmindsport.org](http://stateofmindsport.org)  
Works to improve mental health and wellbeing of Rugby League and Rugby Union players and communities. Supports super league, championship and amateur clubs as well as colleges and community groups to raise awareness of mental health within the sports.

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### The Conservation Volunteers (TCV)

web: [tcv.org.uk](http://tcv.org.uk)  
Runs a network of Green Gyms across the UK.

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### Time to Change

web: [time-to-change.org.uk](http://time-to-change.org.uk)  
Mind and Rethink Mental Illness campaign that aims to challenge mental health stigma and discrimination.

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### Walking for Health

web: [walkingforhealth.org.uk](http://walkingforhealth.org.uk)  
Supports a network of walking groups across England.

## Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk) or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit [mind.org.uk/shop](http://mind.org.uk/shop) or phone 0844 448 4448 or email [publications@mind.org.uk](mailto:publications@mind.org.uk)

## Support Mind

Providing information costs money. We really value donations, which enable us to get our information to more people who need it.

Just £5 could help another 15 people in need receive essential practical information.

If you would like to support our work with a donation, please contact us on:

tel: 0300 999 1946

email: [dons@mind.org.uk](mailto:dons@mind.org.uk)

web: [mind.org.uk/donate](http://mind.org.uk/donate)

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# Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

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