



EXERCISE TO HELP MANAGE CHRONIC PAIN AND/OR FATIGUE

A RESOURCE FOR VETERANS, SERVICE MEMBERS, AND THEIR FAMILIES

Are you one of the millions of Americans who suffers from chronic fatigue and/or chronic pain? If so, exercise may help you to better manage your symptoms. Illnesses such as myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (systematic exertion intolerance disease) (ME/CFS (SEID)) and fibromyalgia involve symptoms of prolonged fatigue, pain, and other symptoms that may impair your ability to do daily activities and can lead to an inactive lifestyle. In turn, being inactive can increase your level of fatigue and pain, lead to deconditioning of the body, make you more prone to injury, and put you at risk for other more severe health problems. A cycle develops:



Daily exercise can end that downward cycle and replace it with an upward, positive cycle. When a person exercises, a new cycle develops.*

Wouldn't it be great to be able to do your daily activities without having to worry so much about the pain or fatigue and still have energy left over for enjoying your recreational activities? Regular physical activity and/or exercise can help you do that.

Recent research studies with patients that had either chronic fatigue syndrome or fibromyalgia have reported that moderate exercise decreased fatigue, pain, stress, and symptoms. At the same time, it improved health perceptions, physical function, and aerobic fitness. Some studies have also shown that low-intensity exercise like walking and pool exercises improved symptoms and ability to do daily activities. As a result of low intensity exercise, people reported less joint and muscle pain.

★ IF YOU ARE A PATIENT WITH CHRONIC PAIN, your body has probably already adapted to what is called a "pain cycle." Pain cycles begin when you move your body or obtain a specific posture to avoid pain. Most often this causes you to move in a distorted way, and poor posture and unbalanced motion create more pain and possibly recurring injury. Breaking the pain cycle can be difficult, especially if the body has been in the cycle for a long time. Sometimes people feel like attempts at exercise are met with flare up pain or worse symptoms so it feels better to rest and avoid being active. This is not the case. Even if there is more discomfort in the beginning, re-training your body and remaining active will help long-term. Graded aerobic exercise is a first step in breaking the pain cycle, reducing pain and injury, and becoming more fit.



★ **Benefits of Regular Physical Activity and/or Exercise:**

- **Decreased pain**
- **Decreased fatigue**
- **Decreased number of tender points (joint and muscle pain)**
- Decrease in blood pressure
- Decreased resting heart rate
- Decreased risk for heart disease or stroke
- **Improved sleep**
- **Decreased anxiety and depression**
- Increased efficiency of the heart
- Increased control of blood sugar levels
- Increased ability to burn fat
- Improved physical fitness
- **Decreased loss of muscle strength and aerobic fitness**
- Increased energy
- Improved cholesterol profile
- Enhanced feeling of well-being
- Enhanced performance of work and recreational activities

Make sure that you contact a doctor and determine your exercise readiness. Exercise must be started slowly and increased gradually. Performing a strenuous exercise if you have not been physically active is not advised and may aggravate symptoms. Some fatigue and soreness is normal when starting an exercise program. You should avoid any level of activity that you find increases your fatigue or any of your other symptoms to a level that is uncomfortable.

TYPES OF EXERCISE AND PROGRAMS TO TRY

Walking, swimming, riding a stationary bike, water aerobics, or a rowing machine are all good aerobic exercise sources. Stretching exercises, yoga, and breathing exercises are good additions to the aerobic exercises because they increase blood supply and nutrients to the joints, decrease risk of injury, increase coordination, improve balance, and reduce stress in muscles.

Start by exercising one to two days per week. Initially, the daily duration could be as little as five minutes or less. Gradually build up to three to four times a week. After you have built up to three to four times a week, gradually increase the length of time for your exercise routine. Go from 5 minutes the first couple of weeks, to 10 minutes the next couple of weeks, to 15 minutes the next couple of weeks. Keep increasing the amount of time you exercise until you reach a goal of 30 straight minutes of aerobic activity three or more days per week. Please see the table on the next page as an example of what your exercise progression might look like.

The intensity of the exercise should only be increased after you have achieved your goal of 30 straight minutes of aerobic activity on most days of the week. After you have achieved the 30 minutes, you should consult your doctor or physical therapist about starting some light strength training.

Be gentle with yourself; listen to your body. Avoid the tendency to increase the amount or the intensity of your exercise on days when you are feeling well. If you overexert yourself, you will increase your risk of aggravating your symptoms.

Exercise has benefits for everyone so make the commitment to yourself to get started in an exercise program. You will feel better, and you will feel better about yourself.

GETTING STARTED IN AN EXERCISE PROGRAM

To begin an exercise program, start by just gradually increasing your daily activity. For example, use any opportunity you have to do some extra walking. Other things you can do include:

- Take the stairs whenever you can.
- Get up more often and do some tasks around your home.
- Limit your television and excessive computer/video game use (as this promotes inactivity).





Studies have demonstrated an abnormal perception of muscular activity in chronic fatigue syndrome patients meaning you may not realize how much exercise you have done, or when it is time to quit for the day. Any pain or fatigue that doesn't feel like your normal daily symptoms might be a sign that you are doing too much. If you feel abnormally fatigued or have more than usual pain, then you should stop exercise until your symptoms decrease and then gradually start exercising again.

Exercise can improve your overall health and improve symptoms such as fatigue and pain. It is never too late to begin an exercise program or experience the many benefits of exercise- take the next steps to get started today! If you have any questions about exercise programs, you can ask your doctor, physical therapist, a fitness trainer, or any professional that is experienced in dealing with people with chronic pain and/or fatigue.

EXAMPLE OF EXERCISE PROGRESSION

Times Per Week	Intensity	How Long	Type of Exercise
1	Light	1 x 5 minutes or less	Aerobic/Stretching
1	Light	1 x 5 minutes	Aerobic/Stretching
2	Light	1 x 5 minutes	Aerobic/Stretching
2	Light	2 x 5 minute sessions	Aerobic/Stretching
2-3	Light	2 x 5 minute sessions	Aerobic/Stretching
3	Light	1 x 5 minute session	Aerobic/Stretching
3-4	Light	1 x 5 minute session	Aerobic/Stretching
3-4	Light	2 x 5 minute sessions	Aerobic/Stretching
3-4	Light	3 x 5 minute sessions	Aerobic/Stretching
3-4	Light	2 x 10 minute sessions	Aerobic/Stretching
3-4	Light	2 x 10 minute sessions 1 x 5 minute session	Aerobic/Stretching
3-4	Light	3 x 10 minute sessions	Aerobic/Stretching
3-4	Light	2 x 15 minute sessions	Aerobic/Stretching
3-4	Light	1 x 20 minute session 1 x 10 minute session	Aerobic/Stretching
3-4	Light	1 x 25 minute session 1 x 5 minute session	Aerobic/Stretching
3-4	Light	1 x 30 minute session	Aerobic/Stretching

This document was developed by the War Related Illness & Injury Study Center (WRIISC)
Health Outcomes Military Exposures (HOME)
Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)
Last Updated: December 2023

