

Starting and sticking to an exercise programme

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Exercise is an important part of a healthy lifestyle. Exercise has many benefits. It gives you the strength, flexibility and endurance needed for daily activities. Exercise has also been shown to improve physical and emotional wellbeing and mental health.

Why exercise?

Exercise can have the following physical benefits:

- Improved health of heart and lungs.
- Increased muscle mass.
- Increased energy levels.
- Stronger bones.
- Improved body shape.
- A good appetite.
- Better sleeping patterns.
- Improved processing of sugars .
- More flexibility in muscle and joints.

As an adult you should aim to do 30 minutes of physical activity, five or more times a week, which is vigorous enough to increase your heart rate and leave you out of breath. This will help reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke. This type of activity is known as aerobic or cardiovascular exercise.

Exercise can also make you feel better in other ways. It can:

- Produce naturally occurring chemicals that make you feel good, called endorphins.
- Help relieve stress and depression and help with relaxation and sleep.
- Provide achievable goals and a focus.
- Improve self-esteem and self-image.
- Offer a change of scene and a chance to meet new people.

Benefits for people with HIV

Exercise doesn't fight HIV, but it can have other important benefits for people with HIV.

Loss of muscle mass and strength is often seen in people with untreated HIV, and exercise can help prevent or delay this.

Exercise can also lower levels of blood fats and sugars. Many people who take HIV treatment have increased levels of blood fats and sugars, and this can increase the risk of some serious long-term health problems such as heart disease, stroke and diabetes.

Low levels of HDL cholesterol (often called 'good' cholesterol) have been linked to faster HIV disease progression and muscle wasting. Exercise can increase levels of HDL cholesterol, whilst reducing levels of 'bad' LDL cholesterol.

Some older anti-HIV drugs can cause changes in body fat called lipodystrophy. These changes include the accumulation of fat around the waist and breasts, as well as loss of fat on the limbs. Regular exercise has been shown to reduce fat accumulation in people with lipodystrophy, whilst helping to build muscle in the areas where fat has been lost.

Where to start

Mention to your doctor that you are thinking of starting an exercise programme. They will probably be pleased that you are taking an interest in your health. They'll also be able to tell you if you need to be careful because of medical problems that might prevent you from exercising safely.

A good exercise programme will have three parts:

- Cardiovascular exercise, such as walking, jogging, cycling, swimming.
- Resistance training, such as weight training or Pilates.
- Stretching, to improve flexibility.

You should aim to exercise for 30 minutes at least five times a week.

Take it easy when you start exercising, to allow your body to adjust.

Many people join a gym or go to their local leisure centre. The Central YMCA in London has a scheme called *Positive Health* which provides gym access and training programmes for people with HIV. Most Central London HIV treatment centres can provide you with a referral. If you are not attending a clinic which refers, ask your GP or HIV doctor if there is any other exercise programme that you can be referred to.

But you don't have to go to a gym or special classes to get benefits from exercising. Walking vigorously, dancing, playing a sport, gardening, and using the stairs can all have benefits.

Keeping it up

Most people are quite enthusiastic when they start exercise, but many people find that this wears off after a few weeks or months.

Some useful tips include:

- Don't over-do things.
- Set small, achievable goals.
- Prioritise exercise and make it part of your regular routine.
- Exercise with others – find a gym buddy or try a group class.
- Do exercise you enjoy – don't see it as a punishment.
- If you join a gym, make sure you feel comfortable in it.
- Listen to your body and rest if you are tired.
- Don't exercise if you feel ill.
- Don't punish yourself or feel guilty.
- **Enjoy yourself!**