

Patient information factsheet

Adult congenital heart disease: a guide to exercise

This factsheet is a guide to exercise for people with congenital heart disease. We hope it will help to answer some of the questions you may have.

You will also have a discussion with your adult congenital heart (ACH) doctor, who may arrange a controlled exercise test for you in hospital and give you some specific exercise advice.

Worries about exercise

We recognise that the idea of exercising can worry some people. You may have been told to avoid certain sports or received conflicting advice in the past.

Some things that you were told as a child may be different now.

For example:

- exercise may have been thought to be dangerous (which it isn't)
- your family or school may not have allowed you to do sports
- the difference between cardiac symptoms and signs of a lack of fitness (for example, shortness of breath) may have not been fully understood

Please be assured that the advice we give you will be tailored to your individual condition and situation. If you have any questions or worries, please talk to us.

Why we recommend exercise

Your doctor has encouraged you to exercise. This could include taking up a sport or another type of physical activity.

We recommend exercise for you because:

- regular physical activity has positive effects on most organs of the body
- regular physical activity can increase life expectancy
- physical activity can make you feel better, both physically and mentally

How much exercise should I be doing?

This will vary for each individual.

Regular and moderate activity is beneficial for most people:

- 'Regular' means at least five times per week for 30 minutes a day.
- 'Moderate' activity means you should feel warm when you are exercising but not uncomfortable.

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Be guided by how you feel and use the 'Talk Test' rule:

- If you can't talk during exercise then slow down.
- If you have enough breath to sing then work harder.

Most people can do more than they think.

What kind of exercise should I do?

Activities to try:

- High energy: cycling, running, tennis or swimming
- Low energy: walking, golf, horse riding, bowls or swimming with floats

Activities to avoid (unless we advise you otherwise):

- **Static exercises**, where you hold muscles in fixed positions. For example: squats against a wall; types of yoga; heavy weights. These exercises may increase pressure on the heart.
- **Competitive activity**
- **Distance running and sprints**
- **Exercising straight after a meal**

Exercising safely

- Include a five to 10 minute warm up and cool down before and after moderate activity.
- Keep hydrated, especially if you have low oxygen levels associated with your heart condition.
- **Always** stop if you feel unwell or dizzy, or if you are in pain.

Talk to your doctor about how to adapt exercises for your own specific needs.

Contact us

If you have any questions or worries, please contact Louisa Nielsen, the adult congenital heart physiotherapy specialist on email: ACHDLiaisonTeam@uhs.nhs.uk

Useful links

Heart Research UK

A guide to congenital heart disease: (select 'Adult patient resources')
chd.heartresearch.org.uk/about-toolkit

Somerville Foundation Website

Information to help you exercise safely
thesf.org.uk/exercise/

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