Exercise and HIV

WHY IS EXERCISE IMPORTANT?

Exercise cannot control or fight HIV disease, but it may help you feel better and fight many of the side effects of HIV and antiretroviral medications (ARVs). It can also help you live healthier while aging with HIV.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF EXERCISE?

Regular, moderate exercise has many of the same advantages for people with HIV as it does for most people. Exercise can:

- Improve muscle mass, strength and endurance
- Improve heart and lung endurance
- Improve your energy level so you feel less tired
- Reduce stress
- Enhance your sense of well-being.
- Increase bone strength
- Decrease LDL cholesterol and triglycerides
- Increase HDL cholesterol
- Decrease fat in the abdomen
- Improve appetite
- Improve sleep
- Improve the way the body uses and controls blood sugar (glucose) which reduces the risk of Type II diabetes.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF EXERCISE?

- You can get dehydrated (lose too much water) if you do not drink enough liquids to keep up your fluid levels.
- Injuries may take more time to heal.
- You can lose lean body mass if you exercise too much. You can injure yourself if you use the wrong form in exercises.
- Exercise can help those with cardiovascular disease (CVD), but talk to your doctor to make sure that you are able to exercise safely!

EXERCISE GUIDELINES FOR PEOPLE WITH HIV

Don’t Overdo It!

A moderate exercise program will improve your body composition and minimize health risks. At first, go slow and schedule exercise into your daily activities.

Work up to a schedule of at least 20 minutes, at least 3 times per week to the best of your abilities. This can lead to significant improvements in your fitness level and you may feel better. As your strength and energy increase, try to increase to 45-60 minutes, 3-4 times a week.

People with HIV can improve their fitness levels through training like those who do not have HIV. However, people with HIV may find it harder to continue with a training program because of fatigue and pain in the feet (peripheral neuropathy). These issues are now seen less often with new HIV medications, however.

Vary your exercise routine so that you do not get bored. Find new ways to keep yourself motivated to maintain your exercise program. Find a friend who can become your exercise buddy.

Your fitness level may be different than it used to be. It is very important that you work your way into an exercise program to avoid injury. Starting with 10 minute sessions is good enough until you build up to an hour.

Eat and Drink Correctly

Drinking enough **liquids** is very important when you exercise. Extra water can help you replace the fluids you lose. Remember that drinking tea, coffee, colas, chocolate, or alcohol can actually make you lose body liquid.

Don’t eat a big meal before you exercise (snacking is OK). Try to eat during the first hour after the exercise session to replenish your body’s energy storage. . Having a small snack like an apple or small peanut butter sandwich on multigrain bread before

working out can provide you with a boost in energy.

Proper **nutrition** is also important. With increased activity, you may need to eat more calories to avoid losing weight, unless weight loss is your goal.

Choose Something You Enjoy

Choose activities that you like. Whether it is yoga, running, bicycling, or another sport, doing something you like will encourage you to maintain your program. Try not to sit for over 2 hours. Take breaks and walk around. Don't get into a rut! Change your activities if you need to so that you stay motivated.

If your fitness level is good, you can compete in competitive sports. Taking part in competitive or team sports does not pose a risk of spreading HIV to other athletes or coaches. Keeping your HIV viral load undetectable protects you and others around you and may prevent losing lean body mass.

Exercise with Weights

Weight training (resistance exercise) is one of the best ways to increase lean body mass and bone density that may be lost through HIV disease and aging. Working out 3 times a week for an hour should be enough if done well. Doing weight training followed by 30 minutes of cardiovascular exercise may be the best way to improve body composition and keep your blood lipids and sugar down. Cardiovascular exercise means increasing oxygenation and heart rate while moving large muscle groups continuously for at least 30 minutes. Activities such as brisk walking, jogging, dancing, bicycling, or swimming can be considered cardiovascular exercise. Walk your dog, park your car far from your destination, use the stairs, and get creative about ways not to remain sedentary. The quality of your old age depends on this!

THE BOTTOM LINE

Exercise can improve lean body mass; decrease fat, stress, fatigue and depression; and improve strength, endurance, and cardiovascular fitness. It may also help the immune system work better.

MORE INFORMATION

The Body: Ten Things You Can Do to Improve Your Physical Fitness

HIV.gov: Exercise and Physical Activity

POZ: HIV and Exercise

Reviewed June 2025