

Exercising with IBD

This information sheet is for people living with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) that want to understand more about exercising in a safe and healthy way.

Key points

- Exercise can reduce your risk of developing health issues related to IBD like bone weakness.
- Psychological health can be improved by staying active which may lead to lower inflammation.
- IBD symptoms like pain and fatigue can make physical activity hard; starting small and building your endurance slowly can help.

Should people with Crohn's or colitis exercise?

Staying physically active is important for people with Crohn's and colitis because the disease can affect your bones, nutrition, psychological health and energy levels. Each of these can be improved with the help of exercise that suits your lifestyle.

Bone health

Steroid medication to treat inflammation and low absorption of important nutrients for bone health (calcium and vitamin D) can lead to weak bones and osteoporosis. Talking with your doctor about ways to protect your bone health is a good place to start because exercise is only one way to help your bones.

Regular weight-bearing exercise, such as brisk walking, jogging, dancing, or active team sports is good for your bones. Outdoor exercise is especially valuable as this will increase your exposure to sunlight and boost your vitamin D production.

Psychological health

Research has discovered a connection between the gut and the brain. It then comes as no surprise that stress can affect the gut and that the gut can have an impact on psychological health.

Exercise can reduce stress by releasing endorphins, the chemicals in the brain that give you a sense of happiness and act as natural painkillers. Gentle exercise can help improve the mind-body connection and may lead to decreased inflammation.

What should I do if my symptoms are getting in the way of exercise?

Painful joints, flares, fatigue and unpredictable urgency for the loo can make it hard to form an exercise routine. Even with the complications that come with having IBD, moderate exercise has proven to help reduce symptoms and improve quality of life.

Whether you're starting regular exercise for the first time or returning to your routine, start small and take it at your own pace. Be kind to yourself when you're feeling unwell and remember resting is as important to your wellbeing as exercise.

Tips and tricks for staying active

- Join an exercise group in a location with toilets like the gym, pool, or park.
- Make physical activity a habit and set yourself some goals:
 - Walk, not drive, to the neighbourhood shops.
 - Do the housework or gardening. Vacuuming and scrubbing floors are especially good exercise!
 - Play with your family in a nearby park or your backyard.
- Try gentle exercise when your joints are hurting. You can try different types of exercise and the time of day that you do them such as in the morning after getting up, when stiffness tends to be worst. This can be a trial and error process but finding the right thing for you is worth it.
- Learn 'good stress' and 'bad stress' – Learn to recognise the signs of your body responding to exercise versus your body rejecting an activity. If you know the difference, you will know when to keep going and when to rest.

Any big changes to your lifestyle should be talked about with your doctor or IBD nurse, particularly if you are experiencing complications, symptoms, or recovering from surgery.

For help or information

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