Exercise and ACHD

Somerville Heart Foundation

Adult Congenital Heart Disease

ACHD

For young people and adults born with a heart condition

Exercise for People with Congenital Heart Disease

As a Congenital Heart Disease (CHD) patient, the thought of exercising can be a worry. You may have been told to avoid certain activities or be concerned about potential side effects. However, carefully-chosen exercises which are suitable for your health conditions, will provide benefits that far outweigh the risks. These include:

1. Better Heart Health

Exercise strengthens the heart, improving circulation and oxygen delivery to the body. This increases stamina and reduces breathlessness during daily activities.

2. Enhanced Mental Well-being

Physical activity releases endorphins, which help reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. Gentle activities like walking, swimming, or yoga can also promote relaxation.

3. Increased Muscle Strength and Mobility

Regular exercise helps build muscle strength, improves flexibility, and supports movement, making daily tasks easier on the heart.

4. Better Weight Management

Staying at a healthy weight reduces pressure on the heart. Exercise, along with a balanced diet, supports the metabolism and helps prevent problems like hypertension and diabetes.

5. Improved Blood Pressure and Cholesterol Levels

Being active can help control blood pressure and cholesterol levels, reducing the risk of further heart problems.

6. Social Benefits

Exercising with others can help people with CHD feel more connected, boost confidence, and prevent loneliness. Choose a group with a similar level of fitness to you or that allows you to make adaptations to suit you when necessary.

What kind of exercise should I do?

Whatever gets you moving! The type and amount of exercise will vary for each individual and you should ask your CHD team for guidance. There are many factors that can affect your ability to exercise, including the type of heart defect you have, other health conditions, medications and what surgeries or procedures you have had. Your CHD specialists are best placed to advise on what activities you can try. Remember that this advice may change over time, if your symptoms and/or condition changes.

According to the European Society of Cardiology, dynamic exercise is preferred to static type exercise. The majority of CHD patients can safely engage in moderate level exercise but please check with your specialist team first.

Certain types of exercise produce different effects on the heart. There are two types of exercise:

Dynamic (or isotonic) exercise uses lots of muscles to bring about the movement. During dynamic activities (e.g. jogging and swimming) the muscles are alternatively relaxing and contracting (tensing). This increases the heart rate and rate of breathing.

Static (also called isometric) exercise, the muscles generate relatively little movement, and is used to build strength.

Most forms of physical activity are part dynamic and part static.

✅ Activities to try

- **Low energy:** walking, golf, Tai Chi, bowling or gentle swimming.
- **High energy:** cycling, running, tennis or swimming

⚠️ Activities that may require some guidance from your CHD team

- **Static (isometric) exercises:** heavy weights and some types of yoga can increase pressure on the heart
- **Competitive activity:** this can be emotionally and physically demanding
- **Impact sports:** anything that could cause trauma to the heart, or cause bleeding if you are prescribed anti-coagulants
- **Distance running and sprints:** these tend to produce maximal effort

How much is too much?

When you exercise it is normal for your breathing and heart rate to increase, so it is important to work out whether you are having a "normal" response to the exercise you are doing, or whether it is a sign that you are working your heart too hard.

"Normal" response to exercise:

- Increased heart rate
- Breathing faster
- Getting warmer and skin becoming pinker
- Muscles start to feel tired

Abnormal symptoms to look out for:

- **Dizziness**
- **Chest pain**
- **Extreme breathlessness**
- **Skin clammy / cold sweats**
- **Any swelling in limbs**

! **Seek medical advice if these symptoms occur before attempting to exercise again**. Only do what you are comfortable with, and slow down or rest if you need to.

Even if you have limited mobility there are ways you can increase your fitness through exercise.

Activities such as sitting exercises, gentle swimming or chair yoga will increase your heart rate and help with joint mobility but always consult your medical team before trying something new.

Talk Test

Always remember the talk test to indicate moderate intensity exercise: *While exercising it is OK to be a little warm and slightly out of breath, but you should still be able to speak in full sentences. If you cannot do this, you need to slow down.*

Record your results

Staying motivated with exercise can be challenging, but setting goals and keeping track of your progress can make a big difference. By focusing on small, manageable steps and recognising your achievements, you're more likely to stay committed and enjoy the process. Here are a few simple ways to keep your motivation strong:

- **Set realistic goals.** Choose targets that are specific and achievable e.g. setting a daily step goal target..
- **Track your progress**. Use a fitness watch, diary or app to note each session and see how far you've come.
- **Celebrate your successes and milestones.** Take time to recognise and reward your progress, no matter how small. Perhaps share your results with a supportive friend or on social media.
- **Review and adjust regularly**. Reflect on what's working and make changes if needed.

Exercising Safely

Although exercise offers numerous benefits, some CHD patients may require more information to determine an appropriate exercise programme. The following points should be considered:

- **Always ask your congenital health team** before starting any exercise routine to determine suitable activities and intensity levels. Some medication can affect heart rate response to exercise e.g. beta-blockers. Other factors such as the type of heart condition, medical devices fitted, and surgeries and procedures all play a part in your fitness level. This, in turn, is likely to affect the level of exercise that can be achieved.
- **Start slowly.** If you aren't used to exercise, begin with low-to-moderate intensity activities such as walking, chair yoga or gentle swimming, which are generally safe and beneficial. You can increase your activity as you become stronger and fitter.
- **Always warm up and cool down** before and after exercise.
- **Stop immediately** if you feel unwell, experience dizziness, chest pain, or extreme breathlessness. Seek medical advice if these symptoms occur before attempting to exercise again.
- **Stay hydrated** especially if you have low oxygen levels associated with your heart condition.
- **Choose the right activities.** Avoid overly strenuous or contact sports unless approved by your doctor.

Exercise is essential for most people with CHD, offering physical and mental health benefits. With the right plan and medical advice, safe activities can strengthen the heart, improve confidence, and make life more enjoyable.

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