

# Physical activity and anxiety



**Anxiety is a normal emotion that helps motivate, prepare, and protect you.**



However, too much anxiety can interfere with living a healthy, fulfilling life.

Physical activity can reduce anxiety in all adults, including those with anxiety disorders. If you are experiencing symptoms of anxiety, regular physical activity can help you manage your symptoms.

## How much and what types of physical activity should I do?

To manage your anxiety, it is important to be active on most days of the week.

**Aerobic activities** can reduce symptoms of anxiety. **Resistance, flexibility, and balance activities** also have general health benefits.

-  **Aerobic activities** work your heart and lungs, such as brisk walking, cycling, jogging, running, cross-country skiing, dancing, stair climbing, swimming, and aerobics classes.
-  **Resistance activities** strengthen your muscles, such as push-ups, squats, lifting weights and aquatic activities.
-  **Balance and flexibility activities** improve your range of motion and stability, reduce your risk of falls, and can prevent injury and strain, such as tai chi, pilates and yoga.

A well-rounded physical activity routine includes all four of these types of activities.

This handout for adults describes:

- how much physical activity you should do, and
- how physical activity can help you manage your anxiety.

## When you begin a new activity, start at your own comfort level.

As you become used to doing the activity, you can slowly increase:

- **how long** you are active
- **how often** you are active
- **how many** activities you do
- **how hard** you work

## Monitor your intensity

Use the “talk test”:

- **low-intensity activity** is when you can talk or sing with ease; you do not experience any shortness of breath.
- **moderate-intensity activity** is when you can talk, but not sing.
- **vigorous-intensity activity** is when you are unable to say more than a few words before you need to pause for a breath.

## Aerobic Physical Activity

Aerobic activities work your heart and lungs, such as walking, cycling, jogging, and swimming.

The following table describes your aerobic physical activity “prescription”.

*Aim for 150 minutes of aerobic activities per week.*



## Aerobic Physical Activity Prescription

### HOW MUCH?

- Warm up for 3–5 minutes *before* aerobic exercise.
- Aim for *150 minutes of aerobic activity per week*. For example,
  - ▶ 10 minutes, 3 times/day for 5 days,
  - ▶ 30 minutes/day for 5 days, or
  - ▶ 50 minutes/day for 3 days.
- Cool down for 3-5 minutes *after* aerobic exercise.

### HOW HARD?

- Aim for a *moderate- to vigorous-*intensity level. This means:
  - ▶ your heart beats faster,
  - ▶ your body feels warmer,
  - ▶ you are sweating lightly,
  - ▶ your breathing is deeper,
  - ▶ you can still talk easily, but not sing.

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What aerobic activities would you like to do?

## Resistance Physical Activity

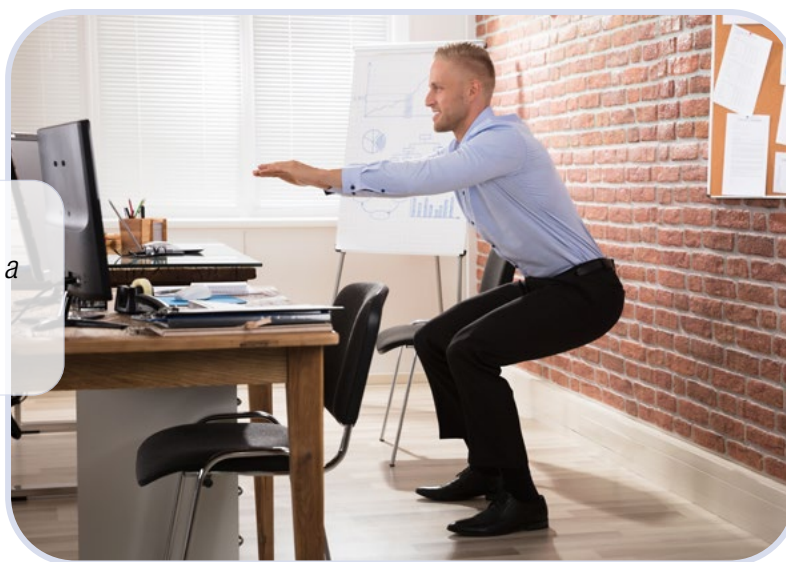
Resistance activities strengthens your muscles, such as training with free weights and bodyweight exercises such as a squat.

### Work all your major muscle groups

It is important to do resistance activities for all of your major muscles.

- Choose 6–10 different activities for each session.
- Start at any duration and intensity and slowly increase them as you feel comfortable.
- Do each exercise slowly in a controlled way.
- Alternate between muscle groups to speed up your workout by allowing some muscles to rest while you work others. For example, you can choose a lower body exercise, such as squats, followed by an upper body exercise, such as chest presses.
- If you feel pain or cannot complete your set, the intensity may be too high. Reduce the weight you are using or the number of repetitions you are doing.
- Over time, you can slowly increase the number of sets that you do for each activity or slowly increase how much you lift.

*Do each exercise slowly in a controlled way.*



The following table describes your resistance physical activity “prescription”.

## Resistance Physical Activity Prescription

### HOW MUCH?

- Do one “set” of an exercise for 10-15 repetitions, such as 10-15 squats.
- Aim for:
  - ▶ 6–10 different resistance exercises,
  - ▶ 2–3 sets of *each* exercise per session,
  - ▶ 1–4 days per week.

### HOW HARD?

- Aim to work at a *moderate-intensity* level. This means:
  - ▶ your heart beats slightly faster than when you are resting,
  - ▶ you are sweating lightly,
  - ▶ breathing is deeper and faster.
- Your muscles should feel exhausted by the end of the set, that is, you cannot do another repetition.
- *Rest* for
  - ▶ 2–4 minutes before starting a new set or muscle group,
  - ▶ at least 1 day between resistance training sessions.

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What resistance physical activities would you like to do?

## Balance Physical Activity

Balance activities improve your motor skills and coordination, as well as reduce your risk of falling. They can be simple exercises, such as standing on one leg. Balance activities may also be resistance or flexibility activities that emphasize balance and coordination, such as tai chi, pilates or yoga.

Activities should be challenging, but you should not feel unsafe, like you are about to fall. Depending on your balancing abilities, activities can be done while seated or standing.

Examples of seated activities:

- range of motion exercises using arms and legs, such as arm or leg circles,
- coordinated movement of arms and legs.

Examples of standing exercises that can be done with or without hand support:

- standing on one foot,
- standing with feet close together,
- sit-to-stand,
- dynamic movements, such as kicking and catching,
- walking sideways and backwards or walking on or near a line.

### Balance Physical Activity Prescription

#### HOW MUCH?

Aim for *at least*:

- 30 seconds/exercise
- 15–30 minutes per session
- 2–3 days per week

#### HOW HARD?

Aim for a *moderate-intensity* level. This means the activities:

- are challenging
- require concentration
- may require you to hold a chair or wall for support sometimes

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What balance physical activities would you like to do?

## Flexibility Physical Activity

Flexibility physical activity improves your range of motion. Daily flexibility activity is the most effective. Do a variety of stretches that target both upper and lower body muscle groups. Include some stretching regularly in your warm-up and cool-down every time you exercise.

If the stretching activities are too hard, ask an exercise professional how to adapt them to match your level of flexibility.

### Flexibility Physical Activity Prescription

#### HOW MUCH?

Aim for *at least*

- 2–4 repetitions of each exercise targeting the major muscles,
- 10 minutes per session,
- 2–3 days per week.

#### HOW HARD?

- Stretch to the point of mild discomfort or tightness (but not pain) and hold the stretch just below this discomfort.
- Build up to holding stretches for 30 seconds.

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What flexibility physical activities would you like to do?

Note: A qualified exercise professional can motivate and support you to develop a physical activity program. Check for local programs or exercise professionals with expertise or experience working with clients who have anxiety.

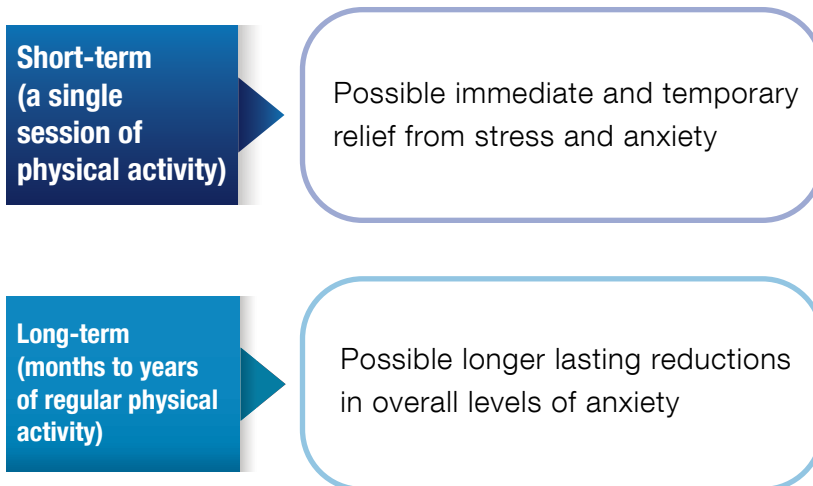
The exercise outlined here is a goal to build up to. If you have an injury or other health condition, adapt your exercise program until you are ready.

Remember, **doing any activity is better than not doing anything at all!**

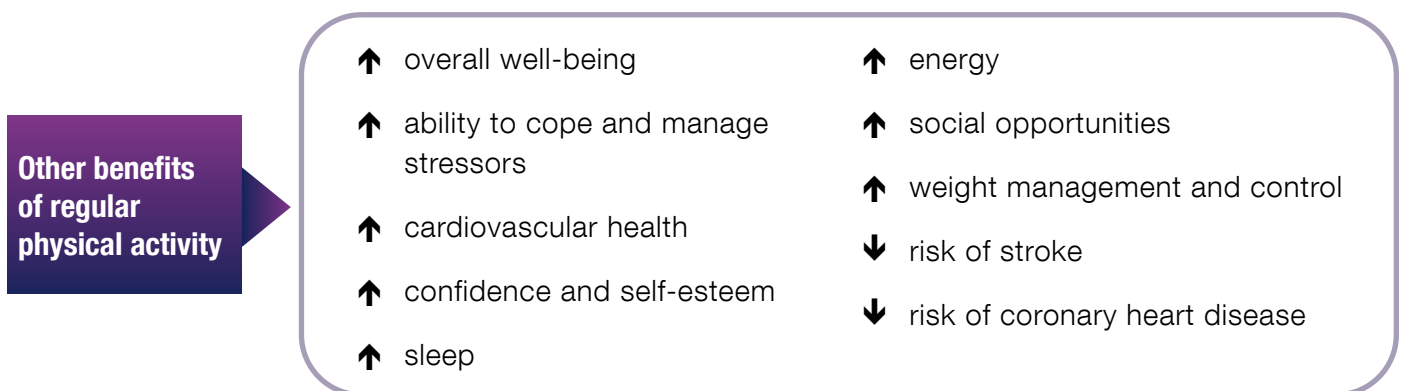
## How can physical activity help my symptoms of anxiety?

Physical activity can reduce immediate and long-term anxiety symptoms, such as improved concentration, decreased irritation, and reduced restlessness, worrying, tension, and fatigue.

Everyone responds differently to physical activity. You may experience a long-term reduction in symptoms; you may experience short-term benefits; or you may experience very little effect. To determine how different activities affect you, keep a journal of your physical activity sessions and anxiety symptoms.



Physical activity can improve your physical health, particularly if you have high anxiety and a higher risk of harmful physical health effects, such as high blood pressure and heart disease.



↑ = improve/increase

↓ = decrease/lower



Being physically active can be a fun, low-cost, accessible, and safe option to help reduce your anxiety symptoms.

It is important to discuss treatment options with your healthcare provider and to follow the medications and treatments prescribed to you.

## Remember:

- Aerobic and resistance activities can help you manage and improve your anxiety.
- You will see many other benefits from being more active.
- Keep it fun! Make physical activity a lasting part of your life by doing activities that you enjoy.

What is one thing you can do *today* to start being more active?

*Keep it fun! Make physical activity a lasting part of your life.*



Topics in this toolkit:

- A. Taking the first step: deciding to be physically active
- B. Making a physical activity plan
- C. Setting goals for physical activity
- D. What stops you from being physically active?
- E. Benefits of physical activity
- F. Physical activity and your blood pressure
- G. High blood pressure safety
- H. Physical activity and Type 2 diabetes
- I. Diabetes safety
- J. Healthy weight and physical activity
- K. Physical activity and anxiety
- L. Anxiety safety
- M. Physical activity and chronic heart failure
- N. Chronic heart failure safety
- O. Physical activity and stroke
- P. Stroke safety
- Q. Physical activity and Parkinson's Disease
- R. Parkinson's Disease safety
- S. Physical activity and dementia
- T. Dementia safety

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