

Anxiety: how to stay safe when active

Aerobic, resistance, balance and flexibility physical activities are important for those who have anxiety.

Aerobic activities make you breathe a little harder and begin to sweat. Aim for 150 minutes of aerobic activities each week, such as brisk walking or swimming.

Resistance activities make you use your muscles to push, pull or lift. Try to do resistance activities 2 to 3 times a week.

Balance activities help to keep you on your feet and reduce your risk of falling.

Flexibility activities lengthen and stretch muscles that are tight or restrained and can help prevent injuries and muscle and joint pain throughout the body. Both balance and flexibility activities should be done 2 to 4 days a week.

Anxiety medications and physical activity

If you are taking medications for anxiety or another condition, talk with your physician about possible side effects and how they may influence your ability to be physically active.

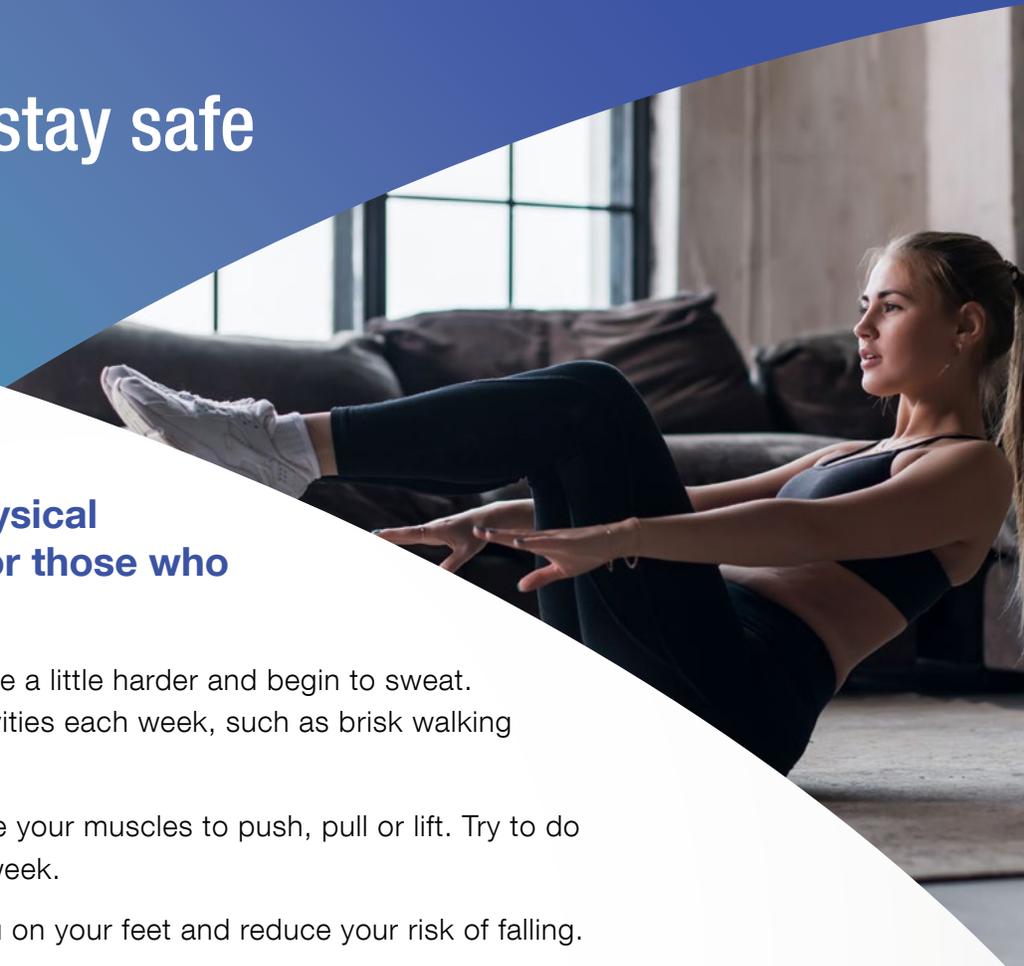
Medications for treating anxiety may include selection serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs), benzodiazepines, and beta-blockers. These medications should not stop you from being physically active. However, you may experience side effects such as:

- drowsiness and fatigue,
- decreased attention and alertness,
- dizziness and loss of balance, and
- altered blood pressure and heart rate.

This handout for adults gives you information to help you stay safe and be well when you are active.

Topics include:

- medication,
- special considerations for being active with anxiety, and
- general safety tips for physical activity.



If you feel drowsy or dizzy after taking your medication, then schedule your workout well before or after taking your medication. Then you will have the energy needed for your workout and can avoid an injury.

If your medication affects your heart rate, be sure not to use a heart rate monitor to track your training intensity.

Other concerns for being active with anxiety

It is a good idea to speak with your healthcare provider before starting a physical activity program. They can use the [Get Active Questionnaire](#), a simple checklist to see if you are ready for a moderate-intensity physical activity program: <https://tinyurl.com/activequestionnaire>

Some individuals may have physical symptoms of anxiety, such as chest pains or heart palpitations (the heart is racing, pounding or fluttering). Individuals with heart disease may have similar symptoms. If you experience these symptoms, speak with your doctor before starting your physical activity program.

Anxiety and physical activity avoidance

It's possible that you may experience more anxiety during an activity session when you are first starting out. The body's response to physical activity includes increased heart rate, breathlessness and sweating. This can feel like the physical response to anxiety, leading some to avoid activity.

Other sources of anxiety might also be a fear of others evaluating you, fear of getting injured, worries around exercising incorrectly, and uncertainty of how to use exercise equipment.

Get emotional and helpful support from family and friends to keep you motivated.



If anxiety is causing you to avoid physical activity, here are some tips:

-  Begin slowly! Start where you are comfortable. For example, jog on the spot for 30 seconds, increase to 45 seconds, and then to 1 minute. Slowly allow yourself to get used to the physical sensations.
-  If you need to stop during an activity session due to anxiety, that's ok! Take the time you need and come back to it when you are calm and feel ready.
-  Choose a setting that is comfortable for you. If gyms or outdoor settings make you uncomfortable, then start at home. As you develop your confidence and physical skills, challenge yourself by going to new and potentially enjoyable environments (e.g., a gym, a fitness studio, an outdoor park, or a walking trail).
-  A mental health professional can help change your thoughts about your body's responses or others' perceptions of you. They can also teach you strategies, including grounding techniques and breathing exercises, which can help when you feel anxious during activity.

Maintaining motivation with anxiety

- Staying motivated can be difficult for anyone, but this may be especially true if you are affected by anxiety. Keep goals achievable and build slowly.
- If you fail to meet a goal, don't be too discouraged; physical activity can be a rewarding experience in and of itself. It is important that you find activities that are meaningful and enjoyable to you.
- Accept setbacks as part of the growth process. If your anxiety causes you to stop or miss a workout, or several, do not be discouraged. Be kind to yourself. Change takes time and set-backs are normal.
- Get emotional and helpful support from family and friends to keep you motivated. Dogs can also be great walking partners!
- An exercise professional may also help you stick to a program. Find a professional that knows about, or is at least sensitive to, your condition. You can even find a professional to meet you at home or you can enroll in online training classes if you are not yet comfortable being active in public settings.

- Anxiety very often occurs with depression. In fact, roughly half of individuals with major depressive disorder also experience an anxiety disorder. If you experience depression, consider using the toolkit available at: exerciseanddepression.ca/

General Safety Tips

Here are some general safety tips to keep in mind when you are active.

- Always warm-up and cool-down.
- Don't push too hard too fast! Start out with what's comfortable and progress gradually.
- Listen to your body and take breaks as needed.
- Drink water before, during and after physical activity.
- Stay safe during activity! While some minor discomfort might be normal when beginning physical activity, you should stop exercising any time you have chest pain or problems breathing. Talk with your doctor about these symptoms.

Remember:

Physical activity can help you manage and improve your anxiety. But make sure you stay safe and have fun when being physically active.

Don't push too hard too fast! Start out with what's comfortable and progress gradually.



- 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

Centre for
Active Living
www.centre4activeliving.ca