

Health Advice: Exercise Is a Complementary Medicine for Chronic Conditions



By Diana Iscenko

Getting [exercise](#) during quarantine is hard for everyone, but it may be the most detrimental to the 100 million American adults who struggle with chronic pain. Exercise is a common treatment to minimize chronic pain. While it's not a replacement for more traditional medicine, it can increase mobility, decrease inflammation, and minimize your overall pain.

Exercise also helps improve sleep patterns, which are often disrupted by medications commonly used to treat chronic pain.

People who exercise consistently usually sleep longer and deeper than those who don't exercise.

Remember that it's important to talk to a doctor before starting a new exercise regimen. Depending on where your chronic pain bothers you, some exercises may be too difficult and will worsen your pain. Always move at your own pace, and listen to your body! Some days will be harder than others, but don't force your body to something that will hurt you.

Keeping your own body and limitations in mind, here is some health advice on four different types of exercise that you might want to try that can help minimize chronic pain:

1. Stretching exercises

Stretching once a day increases flexibility, loosens stiff muscles, and brightens your mood. If you have chronic pain, stretching can help release the tension you feel in your body. Stretching is a great exercise for those new to working out because it's low impact and can easily be done at home without equipment.

Stretching is especially helpful for those with chronic back or neck pain. To stretch your back, get on your hands and knees and start with your back flat. Stretch your abdominal muscles and raise your back to be curved. You want to let your head hang comfortably between your arms as you stretch your back. Try to keep your abdominal muscles as tight as possible while stretching your back.

To stretch your neck, start by sitting with your legs crossed. Bring your left ear to your left shoulder. Lower your head and bring your chin to your chest. Breathe deeply and roll your head so your right ear touches your right shoulder. Remember to relax your neck muscles and stop if you feel and pain.

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2. Relaxation exercises

Another beginner-friendly exercise is relaxation exercises! This requires no equipment and can be done virtually anywhere you want. Relaxation exercises include deep breathing and visualization, which can be helpful to those living with chronic pain. While this may not “feel” like traditional exercise, it releases endorphins and can minimize pain.

To start, lie in a comfortable position on a bed or the floor. Relax your body and close your eyes. Focus on your breathing: inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. It may be helpful to place your hands on your stomach to feel yourself breathing. Visualize the pain leaving your body as you continue to focus on your breathing.

Many people use relaxation exercises before bed to help them fall asleep, but it can be done at any point during the day.

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3. Strengthening exercises

While these exercises can be a little more intense, it's still easy to do strengthening exercises from the [comfort of your home](#) with little-to-no equipment. These exercises can help reduce joint pain, build muscle and prevent injuries in the future. Building core muscles is especially important for those with chronic pain because it helps with posture and

balance and can prevent future injuries resulting in worsened pain.

You want to push your muscles outside their comfort zone during these exercises. Any exercise that uses resistance against your muscles will make you stronger. Sometimes that resistance is your own body weight. There's no need to overextend yourself.

Strength exercises do not need weights. There are plenty of exercises that build strength—such as squats, push-ups, lunges, planks and jumping jacks—that don't require any equipment and don't feel as intimidating. Remember to do several repetitions of each to build up your strength!

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4. Cardio exercises

Cardio exercises are great because there's something for everyone! These exercises include walking, running and swimming. Cardio helps heart health and builds endurance. It also releases endorphins, which will help decrease your chronic pain.

If you have access to a gym, you can use the treadmill or elliptical machines to work on your cardio. If not, you can go on walks or runs. Don't worry about how long you can exercise. Practice makes perfect and the more often you do cardio exercises, the more endurance you'll build up. If you use mobility aids, be sure to take it with you on your walks.

If you find walking or running too difficult, swimming is a great alternative. It's a great cardio exercise while being extremely low impact. Swimming keeps your body moving without putting pressure on your muscles and joints. It's also therapeutic and can help you clear your mind.

Which of these exercises are you willing to try? Start a conversation in the comments below!