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### Health Plans for Employment: Physical Activity

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# Physical Activity

Your physical and mental condition affects your life. Health conditions like chronic pain, fatigue, and depressed mood can slow your progress toward getting a job and reaching other important life goals. Making changes toward a healthier lifestyle can help you manage these types of health conditions so they don't delay your progress. This fact sheet describes how physical activity can help you manage certain health conditions in order to reach (and maintain) your employment goals.

## Introduction

There are many kinds of physical activity. The types of activities you do depends on your personality, ability, and available time. Some people like activities that can be done alone like walking, arm cycling, or swimming. Others enjoy being part of a group and might participate in an exercise class or sports team. Some people like to exercise outside. Others prefer being indoors. Even chores like vacuuming and yard work provide physical activity benefits.

## Benefits of Physical Activity

People benefit from exercise in different ways. For instance, many people report that exercise helps reduce stress. It can also help people have the



energy and strength they need to complete daily tasks. In general, moderate physical activity provides the most health benefits. These activities increase your breathing, but still leave you able to talk.

Everyone can benefit from regular physical activity in the following ways:

- improved heart health
- increased muscle strength and tone
- injury prevention

- reduced pain, fatigue, depression, and anxiety
- weight control
- improved sleep

## Types of Physical Activities

**Aerobic activities** increase your heart rate for a period of time. They include activities like water aerobics, swimming, wheelchair racing, walking, mowing the lawn, dancing, or hand cycling. These activities help with blood circulation. They also strengthen your heart muscle. It is good to get at least 30 minutes of

moderate aerobic exercise most days of the week. The more physical activity you can add to your regular routine, the better. You can do your daily exercise all at one time, or in smaller periods. For example, you could use a hand cycle for one 30-minute period or for two 15-minute periods.



**Muscle strengthening** activities build muscle and bone. They include weight training, sit-ups, push-ups, etc. Most adults should do strengthening activities for each major muscle group (legs, arms, core, etc.) at least two times a week.



**Stretching** activities reduce stiffness and increase flexibility. Stretching helps increase range of motion and reduces contractures. Stretching also increases



blood flow to muscles, which helps prevent injuries. Stretching should be done slowly. For example, if you are stretching your calf muscle, do so until you feel a mild tension in your calf. It is important not to overdo it! Overstretching can result in muscle tears.

Many physical activities combine aerobic exercise, muscle strengthening, and stretching. These are great choices and can be done for a few minutes at a time or for longer periods. Some examples include yoga, tai chi, and Pilates. A well balanced exercise program will keep you fit for doing other types of activities like raking leaves, climbing stairs, or shopping at the mall. It will also lower your risk of health problems related to an inactive lifestyle.

## Lowering Your Risk of Injury

### Seek professional guidance.

Talk to your doctor or physical therapist before starting a new exercise program. Your doctor can help you understand how exercise might affect your specific health condition. A physical therapist can teach you how to perform exercises safely.



### Do not ignore pain and start slow.

Talk to your doctor right away if certain activities cause new pain or make pain worse. You may not be doing the activity in a safe way. Many people hurt themselves when they begin a new exercise program. If you've been inactive for a while, you must start out very slowly. Start with activities that are easy on your joints or low impact. If you have trouble lifting even the lightest weight at the gym, start by lifting soup cans or nothing at all.

Assistive devices may help decrease pain related to activity. For instance, a back brace may help reduce pain during seated exercises. A knee brace may help with walking or playing a sport. Talk to a doctor about your options.

## National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability (NCHPAD) Resources

[NCHPAD.org](http://NCHPAD.org) is a website on exercise for people with disabilities. Use this website to find some activities you might enjoy! If you can't find what you're



looking for, talk to a NCHPAD information specialist (toll free: 1-800-900-8086).

## Physical Activity

[NCHPAD.org](http://NCHPAD.org) has many articles on Physical Activity. To access these materials, click on the [Articles](#) link in the menu at the top of the NCHPAD website.

Within this section, you will find factsheets on:

- Adaptive Sports (such as skiing, archery, cycling, sit volleyball, table tennis, etc.)
- Exercise and Fitness (such as physical activity guidelines, strengthening exercises, training with weights or resistance, choosing a fitness center, aquatic therapy, yoga for individuals with disabilities, etc.)
- Fun and Leisure (such as camping, horseback riding, fishing, hunting swimming, etc.)



## Videos

[NCHPAD.org](http://NCHPAD.org) also has videos on many exercise topics; click on the [Videos](#) link in the menu at the top of the website. The videos are organized by topic including sections on inclusive fitness, sports and recreation, and thera-band exercises. New videos are being added all the time!

## Additional Information

Send a request to a NCHPAD information specialist at [NCHPAD.org](http://NCHPAD.org). To do this, click on the [Contact](#) link in the menu at the top of the website to find email and phone contact information. NCHPAD can offer free personalized information on exercise, disability, and more.

## Physical Activity Program

[NCHPAD 14 Weeks to a Healthier You](#) is an interactive website that can help you start a physical activity program. Getting started is easy. First, set up an account (click on the “14 weeks to a Healthier You” link on the [NCHPAD.org](http://NCHPAD.org)



homepage). Next, answer some brief questions about your health behaviors. Once

you have entered your health information, you will receive feedback on how to improve your health. There is also an online journal to track your progress and a place to share your experiences.

## Set a Goal

Setting a health behavior change goal can move you closer to achieving and maintaining employment. When setting a goal to change your physical activity, it is important to be realistic. You may want to talk with your doctor or physical therapist before trying new exercises to prevent injury. Think about where you are now, and then think about where you want to be. Begin by slowly increasing your physical activity, and work up to your goal from there. Remember to keep track of your progress and reward yourself for accomplishments.



*Good Luck!*

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