

Exercise safety

Exercise safety is important to avoid injury and maintain good health. Regular exercise is vital for good health, but poor knowledge of basic safety techniques could lead to injuries.

For example, common sports injuries like shin splints are less likely to occur if you run on softer surfaces and allow sufficient recovery time. Wearing protective equipment can reduce the risk of grazes and fractures.

Get good advice

You can obtain information and advice about exercise safety from your doctor, physiotherapist, and from sporting associations. You can also consult an exercise physiologist.

An exercise physiologist should have studied exercise science or human movement at tertiary level. They may work with other health professionals to use exercise as a treatment, preventative measure or for rehabilitation.

An exercise physiologist will assess a patient or client's needs and capabilities; may prescribe specific activity; and supervise ongoing activity and progress. For further information on exercise physiologists, contact the Australian Association for Exercise and Sports Science.

Take care

Stop exercising immediately and seek medical advice if you:

- Feel discomfort or pain.
- Have chest pain or other pain that could indicate a heart attack, including pain in the neck and jaw, pain travelling down the arm or pain between the shoulder blades.
- Experience extreme breathlessness.
- Develop a rapid or irregular heartbeat during exercise.

General health and fitness

It takes time to increase your overall level of fitness. Training too hard or too fast is a common cause of exercise and sports-related injuries. Suggestions include:

- See your doctor for a full medical check-up before embarking on any new fitness program.
- Warm up thoroughly by performing slow, sustained stretches and going through the motions of your sport or activity.
- Always cool down after exercise with plenty of slow stretching.
- Cross-train with other sports and exercises to reduce the risk of overtraining.
- If a joint is prone to injury, consider strapping or taping it prior to exercising.
- See your doctor for regular medical check-ups.

Dehydration

You can lose around one and a half litres of fluid for every hour of exercise. One of the first symptoms of dehydration is fatigue, which causes a significant drop in sporting performance. Suggestions include:

- Drink three cups of water two hours before exercise.
- Drink two cups of water about 15 minutes before exercise.
- Drink one cup of water every 15 minutes while exercising.
- Drink two cups of water after exercise.
- You can figure out whether you drank enough water by weighing yourself before and after exercise – a loss of one kilo is equivalent to about one litre of lost fluid.

Thirst and dehydration

Thirst is a clear indication that you need to drink. If you do not respond to thirst, your risk of dehydration increases.

It is rare but possible to drink too much water, usually during activity of four hours or more such as endurance events. Drinking too much water can lead to hyponatremia (low blood sodium). This condition can be fatal and is characterised by a gradually worsening headache, swelling of hands and feet and a temperature usually not above 40C.

Hot weather

Exercising in hot weather puts additional strain on your body. Conditions such as heat stroke are more likely. Even with adequate fluids, heat illness such as hyperthermia can still occur.

Symptoms of hyperthermia can include:

- Irritability
- General discomfort
- Weakness
- Headache
- Nausea
- Cramps

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Suggestions to avoid heat illnesses include:

- Drink plenty of water before, during and after exercise.
- Protect yourself from sunburn with clothing such as long-sleeved tops, full-length trousers, a hat and sunglasses.
- Apply SPF 30+ sunscreen to all areas of exposed skin – you may like to consider waterproof varieties.
- Reapply sunscreen frequently, particularly if you are sweating heavily.
- Exercise in the cooler parts of the day – preferably before dawn or after sunset.
- Reduce your exercise intensity.
- Don't drink alcohol, tea or coffee before or after exercising, as these beverages promote fluid loss.
- If you have travelled to a hotter climate, remember that it may take about 10 days of exercising before you fully acclimatise.

Cold weather

In cold weather, muscles are more susceptible to injuries.

Suggestions include:

- Wear appropriate warm clothing.
- Multiple layers of clothing trap more body heat than one bulky layer.
- Devote more time to warming up and stretching before exercising and make sure you undertake a thorough cool-down.
- Keep up your fluid intake, since cold weather prompts fluid loss.
- Don't forget sun protection - it is possible to be sunburnt even in cold weather, especially at high altitudes or on clear days.

Proper techniques

Injuries can be caused by improper form or technique. For example, feet that roll inwards (pronate) while running can increase the risk of shin splints.

Suggestions include:

- If your sporting equipment is handheld, make sure you are using the right grip – for example, holding a tennis racquet the wrong way can increase your risk of tennis elbow (tenonitis).
- Make sure your equipment and protective wear is the appropriate size for your body.
- Avoid bouncing when you stretch to reduce the risk of muscle tears.
- Whenever possible, protect your back – make sure that your thighs take the load instead.
- Consult with your gym instructor, coach, sporting association, exercise physiologist or physiotherapist for instruction on how to improve your sporting technique.

Sporting equipment

Most sports and exercises rely on some type of equipment, such as running shoes, bicycles or racquets.

Safety suggestions include:

- Wear appropriate shoes for your sport, and replace them before they wear out.
- Maintain your equipment and do regular safety checks.
- Make sure bicycle tyres are properly inflated, and that the height of the seat allows your legs to almost fully extend while pedalling.
- If you are unsure how to maintain or check your equipment, consult with your coach or sporting association.

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Protective equipment

Protective equipment – such as mouth guards, shin pads and helmets – can significantly reduce the risk of injury by absorbing the impact of falls or collisions. Suggestions include:

- Wear protective equipment that is appropriate to your sport or activity.
- Make sure the equipment fits properly – growing children may need their equipment updated regularly.
- The equipment should be worn during training, not just for competition.
- Maintain the equipment and replace if worn out.

Exercising at night

You may feel uneasy or unsafe when exercising at night. Suggestions include:

- Exercise with a friend.
- Let others know where you may be walking or exercising, and when you plan to return home.
- Stick to populated or well-lit areas.
- Wear brightly coloured, light-reflective clothing so that you're visible to drivers.
- Walk in the direction of oncoming traffic so you can see what's coming.
- Take a torch with you.
- Consider attaching reflector discs to your clothing and shoes.
- Fit lights to your bicycle, and make sure the lights are working properly before you start cycling.
- If you don't feel safe, choose another time to exercise.

Walking your dog

Walking your dog can be good exercise. Suggestions include:

- Keep your dog on a leash.
- Only unleash your dog at appropriate venues, such as parks or on the beach at approved times.
- Remember that most national and state parks (and other conservation areas) do not allow dogs – always check with a phone call beforehand.
- If you spot an unleashed dog, keep calm and avoid it if possible.

Listen to your body

Injuries are more likely if you ignore your body's signals of fatigue, discomfort and pain. Suggestions include:

- Make sure you have at least one recovery day, and preferably two recovery days, every week.
- If you feel breathless during exercise, slow down.
- Injuries need rest – trying to 'work through' the pain will cause more damage to soft muscle tissue and delay healing.
- If you seem to be suffering from more colds and infections than usual, you could be exercising too much – ease off on your schedule.
- Monitor your training and resting heart rates and keep a training diary.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Physiotherapist
- Sports association
- Exercise physiologist
- 'Go for your life' Infoline service Tel. 1300 73 98 99
- Website <http://www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au>

Things to remember

- Training too hard or fast is a common cause of sports-related injuries.
- Consult with your gym instructor, coach, sporting association, exercise physiologist or physiotherapist for instruction on how to safely approach physical activity.
- Wear appropriate protective gear and make sure your sporting equipment (including shoes) is well maintained.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by, Kinect Australia (inc VICFIT in Victoria). The Better Health Channel is part of the Department of Human Services, Victoria

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