

Exercise and cholesterol: key facts

Which cholesterol measures respond well to exercise?

HDL ('good') cholesterol and triglycerides show the greatest improvement with exercise (that is, HDL cholesterol levels increase and triglycerides levels decrease). Total cholesterol and LDL ('bad') cholesterol are less likely to change with exercise.

I plan to start regular exercise – how much will my cholesterol levels improve?

The capacity of exercise to affect cholesterol is often modest (<20 per cent) and highly variable between individuals. Some may even find little-to-no change in cholesterol, but will still benefit in other ways, including changes to other blood fats.

I plan to start regular exercise – how soon will my cholesterol change?

Typically, it can take several weeks or months. Again, this varies a lot between individuals.

Important: Ensure you read Exercising safely on pages 46 and 48. You may need to seek medical clearance before starting exercise. The recommendations described are based on exercise guidelines published by national and international health advisory organisations.

Weight loss

Although it is often a major motivation to begin exercising, many people find they do not lose weight from exercise alone. If this is the case for you, it does not mean you are doing something wrong! It is simply because 30 minutes a day does not make a big enough impact on your daily energy use. In fact, it appears that most people require 1 hour per day (or more) for weight loss.

Improvements in cholesterol may be greatest when larger amounts of exercise are performed and weight loss is achieved. However, like many of its 'hidden' health benefits, it is important to remember that exercise has direct effects on cholesterol that *do not depend* on weight loss. So don't get discouraged if you are not losing weight.

Getting started

This chapter provides general principles to follow when exercising. The possibilities are endless when choosing what kind of exercise to do – you don't need a gym membership or expensive equipment to do it effectively. You can potentially get the same workout from playing tennis or dancing as you would from using a treadmill or an exercise bike. Enjoyment and variety should be a priority.

If you're unsure of where or how to begin, or are worried about exercising because of other health conditions, you may wish to consider consulting an Accredited Exercise Physiologist (AEP). These university-trained allied health professionals are specialists in prescribing exercise for a wide range of health conditions and can create a program to suit your needs (find an AEP at www.essa.org.au).

Tips for starting an exercise program you'll enjoy and will continue doing

Find other people to exercise with

- Social support from a friend or family member makes it more enjoyable. It can also be more motivating, because you don't want to let someone down by missing a session.
- Look for activities that are run by local community groups. There might be a walking group or social tennis club you could join. The National Heart Foundation also organises group walks in many areas (check www.heartfoundation.org.au for more information).

Set goals for yourself

- The satisfaction of achieving a goal can be a good motivator to continue exercising.
- Setting the right kinds of goals is critical. Don't aim for outcomes that may be too difficult to achieve (e.g. weight loss of 1 kg per week). When you first begin exercising, setting short-term goals on the number and length of exercise sessions can be effective.
e.g. Week 1: Complete 3 sessions of at least 15 minutes.
Week 2: Complete 3 sessions of at least 20 minutes.
- Keep checking your progress against your goals and revise them if necessary.

Keep an exercise diary

- Tracking your progress over time can show how much you've improved and can be useful in setting new short- and long-term goals.
- If you have a route you regularly follow when walking, running or cycling, time yourself every now and then (and record the results in your diary) to monitor changes in your fitness level.

Change things around

- Doing the same thing every day can become tedious. Find some alternative routes or do some new activities to keep things interesting.

Plan ahead

- Lack of time is a very common excuse for missing a session or not exercising at all. If you consider exercise to be important, you need to make it a top priority and set aside time for it in advance (schedule it in your diary just as you would an appointment). If you have a particularly busy week coming up, remember that shorter, 10-minute sessions still count.

Avoid doing too much, too soon