Don’t Let Sickness Get You Down
Exercises for a Healthier You

We all know the importance of exercise for healthy persons. However, do you know what exercises are appropriate for you if you have a medical condition? We speak to doctors from Raffles Hospital to learn more about exercises that would benefit you.

Any form of exercise is good for the body. If you have chronic conditions, you can still benefit from exercise. Exercise is not just for the healthy, but with care, it is safe for those with health conditions as well. Speak to your doctor to assess your health before starting out on any exercise regime.

Benefits of exercise include blood pressure reduction, metabolism stimulation, weight maintenance, stress and anxiety reduction, temperature regulation, pain relief and insomnia management. It can help improve circulation and lung capacity, reduce the risk of getting diabetes mellitus, osteoporosis or hypertension, improve muscle tone and stamina, enhance self-esteem and confidence; and lift depression.

So are you ready to start moving your body? Let’s move it!
Heart Health

Being physically inactive is a major risk factor for developing coronary artery disease and other heart ailments. “As fatty deposits and cholesterol build up in the arteries, they cut off blood supply to your heart,” says Dr Alvin Ng Chee Keong, Specialist in Cardiology & Consultant, Raffles Heart Centre. “These lead to high blood pressure and lower levels of HDL, aka our ‘good’ cholesterol.”

The good news is that you don’t have to run marathons to decrease these risk factors. Aerobic exercises such as brisk walking or swimming for 30 minutes a day can significantly decrease your heart disease risks. Aerobic exercises strengthen the heart and lungs and improve the body’s ability to use oxygen. Over time, aerobic exercise can help decrease your heart rate and blood pressure and improve your breathing. You should slowly work up to an aerobic session lasting 20 to 30 minutes, at least three to four times a week.

Stretching before and after exercises are also recommended as they help prepare the muscles for activity and prevent injury and muscle strain. Regular stretching also increases your range of motion and flexibility.

Diabetes

Diabetes is a condition whereby the body has trouble taking glucose from the blood and delivering it to the rest of the body so that it can be used as energy. This is due to a lack of, or an inability to use insulin, the hormone required to “escort” glucose from the blood to cells of the body.

Dr Stanley Liew, Specialist in Endocrinology & Consultant, Raffles Internal Medicine Centre, recommends both aerobic exercise and strength training for diabetic patients.

“Along with proper nutrition, aerobic exercise can increase insulin sensitivity and restore normal glucose metabolism by decreasing body fat. Strength training (resistance or weight training) also decreases body fat by raising the metabolism and more importantly, increases glucose uptake by the muscles and enhance the ability to store glucose.”

Diabetic patients should take special care of their feet by wearing comfortable shoes during their exercise routines as a small open wound may lead to infection. “Check your feet daily for scratches, cuts, blisters, ingrown toenails, corns, and calluses. If you notice ingrown toenails, athlete’s foot, and cuts or sores that are not healing, contact your doctor right away,” added Dr Liew.
Back Pain

Are you suffering from back pain and as a result abstaining from strenuous activities? While this may be recommended for the short term, back exercise is actually the best way to rehabilitate the spine and help alleviate back pain.

“A strong, well-conditioned back can tolerate more stress, and protect the spine better as compared to a back that has not been conditioned through exercise. Conditioning through flexibility and strengthening back exercises not only helps the back avoid injury, or minimise the severity of injury if the spine is traumatised, it also can help relieve the pain of many back conditions,” shares Dr David Wong, Specialist in Orthopaedic Surgery & Consultant, Raffles Orthopaedic Centre.

Exercises that strengthen the spinal column and the supporting muscles, ligaments and tendons are most appropriate for back pain management. These exercises should focus not only on the back, but also the abdominal (stomach), gluteus (buttocks) and hip muscles. Taken together, these strong ‘core’ muscles can provide back pain relief because they provide strong support for the spine, keeping it in alignment and facilitating movements that extend or twist the spine.

Bone and Joint Condition

Want to slow down or prevent the onset of osteoporosis and osteoarthritis? According to Dr Lim Yeow Wai, Specialist in Orthopaedic Surgery & Consultant, Raffles Orthopaedic Centre, 30 minutes of physical activity three times a week can help. Exercises such as walking, cycling, swimming and strength training keep joints flexible and cartilage tissue from breaking down and weakening.

“Weight-bearing exercises are the best ways to build strong bones. These include walking, stair climbing, running, hiking, and weight lifting. These exercises stimulate bone formation, and retain calcium in the bones that are bearing the load. The force of muscles pulling against bones stimulates this bone building process. So any exercise that places force on a bone will strengthen that bone,” he explains.

Exercise also increases muscle strength, coordination, and balance. It decreases the likelihood of falls, especially for the elderly.

That said, those with bone and joint conditions should avoid high impact exercises that can stress the joints, such as aerobic workouts that require bouncing, competitive sports or running.
For cancer survivors, exercise seems like the last thing on their mind. Yet studies have shown that exercise may prevent the disease returning for specific cancers including breast and colorectal cancer. Cancer patients should engage in exercise. Even moderate exercise such as brisk walking, heavy cleaning, lawn moving, cycling and badminton, can help.

Dr Donald Poon, Specialist in Medical Oncology & Consultant, Raffles Cancer Centre explains, “Research has shown that engaging in vigorous physical activity for an equivalent of 30 to 45 minutes of brisk walking, five days a week, can help lessen many symptoms commonly experienced after cancer treatments, reduce the risk of relapse and improve the chance of a fulfilling survival.”

Contrary to common perceptions, physical exercise does not make one feel more tired during treatment, but can in fact boost one’s energy after that. It can also lower your chances of getting heart disease and osteoporosis in the long term. “You should check with your attending doctor if you have doubts as to which exercise programme you can embark on because each condition may impose different exercise limitations,” adds Dr Poon.

Feeling down and lethargic? Depression can get one really down. But that’s no excuse to stop moving. In fact, exercise has psychological and physical benefits that help reduce anxiety and improve mood.

According to Dr Lim Yun Chin, Specialist in Psychiatry & Consultant, Raffles Counselling Centre, “The links between depression and exercise is not clear. However, exercise probably helps ease depression by releasing feel-good brain chemicals, reducing immune system chemicals that can worsen depression and increasing body temperature, which may have calming effects.

There’s a wide range of activities that you can engage in to boost your activity level and help you feel better. Certainly running, going to the gym, playing basketball and other fitness activities that get your heart pumping would help. So can gardening, washing your car, or strolling around the block and other less intense activities. Basically, the goal is to get you off the couch and moving. So wait no longer, get out and make exercise a part of your life.”