Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Exercising Safely: Tips to Avoid Workout Injuries



Starting a fitness program is one of the best things you can do for your overall health. Besides reducing your risk for many chronic diseases, it helps maintain a healthy weight and improves balance, co-ordination, your appearance and maybe even your overall outlook on life. But while exercise is great for your body, injuries can happen. To avoid getting injured while exercising be sure to:

See a doctor. Before starting a new physical activity — particularly if you have an existing medical condition — it's always a good idea to talk to your doctor. This will help you identify what you physically can and can't do and can give you tips on how to stay injury-free.

Start slow. You need to choose activities that fit within your fitness level and ability. The best exercises to start with are low-impact ones including biking, swimming and the elliptical machine. These options will help you develop your cardiovascular health without overdoing it. As your confidence and skill level improve, you can try more challenging exercises. A safe way to reach your goals is to follow the rule of 10. By gradually raising the weight lifted or miles walked by **no more than 10 per cent each week**, you will protect your body and see positive results.

Learn the moves. Consider taking lessons before trying a new activity. If you're starting a workout regime at the gym, book a few sessions with a personal trainer to set you on the right path. Want to do yoga in the comfort of your own home? Take a few classes with a professional so you get a handle on the basics first.

Warm up and cool down. To prepare your body for exercise you always should start with a low-intensity activity for about 10 minutes. This will raise the temperature of your muscles, loosening them up and making them less likely to tear. Similarly, slowing down gradually, or cooling down, helps your whole body recover from the exercise. Cool down activities, including light jogging and a good stretch, help the body remove lactic acid that has built up in your muscles, which will help with pain.

Mix it up. Instead of focusing on one type of exercise, combine different activities that cover strength, endurance and flexibility training. "Cross-training" is a great way to prevent injury and allows you to use multiple muscles or the same muscle group in a different way. If you lifted weights yesterday try hopping on the treadmill or heading outside for a long run today. If you must lift weights every day, make sure to regularly alternate the parts of the body you're working. This method will also add variety to your exercise program to keep you motivated.

Get the gear. Running in worn-out or ill-fitting shoes will actually do you more harm than good; and a damaged helmet or an outdated knee brace is just asking for trouble. Always wear the necessary equipment for whatever activity you're participating in. Make sure it's the right size, is in good shape and, if it applies, is approved by the organization that governs the sport.

Stay hydrated. Make sure to keep hydrated before exercising, throughout your workout and once you've finished. Dehydration can cause your muscles to cramp, especially in hot and humid conditions.

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Listen to your body. It's normal to experience muscle soreness after exercising, particularly if you're getting back into the swing of things or trying something entirely new. But, pain is your body's way of telling you that something is wrong. You need to be able to distinguish between "good" and "bad" pain. Good pain is usually tired muscles that just need some recovery time, whereas bad pain often comes on suddenly, is accompanied by swelling, clicking or popping and lasts longer than a week. Don't try to push through the pain or mask it with medication. Respect your body and pay attention to warning signs.

Stop and treat. If you do happen to injure yourself, you must respond quickly to prevent long-term damage. Stop the activity immediately, ice, compress and elevate the injury and depending on the severity, you should seek medical treatment. Even if you start to feel better you must give your body time to heal. Don't start exercising until you're completely recovered or get the go-ahead from a health professional.

Don't let the fear of injury stop you from being an active and healthy person. Start slow, ask for help and always listen to your body. By starting smart you can avoid these frustrating setbacks, have fun and reach your fitness goals.