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Gentle Exercise is healing for chronic illness

Exercise isn't a pleasant thought if you suffer from chronic pain or fatigue. However, gentle activity will aid in rehabilitation. We were made to move. Movement facilitates the function of every operating system in the human body. Sit still, and you will be ill.

Thirty-five years ago, Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME), otherwise known as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS), ended my competitive bodybuilding career. I developed a severe case of laryngitis directly after having my wisdom teeth pulled. After a year of poor sleep and inconsistent eating due to intense workouts, pursuing two busy careers, going back to school to study Nutrition, and raising two young children, I should have expected this. There just weren't enough hours in a day to accomplish everything I needed to do. My weakened immune system finally announced, "Enough, you idiot – we're shutting down!"

For months I could only lie in bed. Just lifting my head off the pillow was a workout. Exercise? I didn't want to think about it! But I'm glad I forced myself to do very simple, gentle activities. Of course, nutrition and relaxation techniques were also critical in my healing process. But exercise is necessary too and shouldn't be avoided by those with CFS/ME, Fibromyalgia, Crohn's Disease, and other immune system disorders. Here's why;



1. Gentle exercise can gradually strengthen your body, and as it becomes stronger, energy levels improve, and fatigue may become less frequent and severe. This is because physical activity enlarges mitochondria, the energy-producing part of the cell.
2. A stronger and more flexible body can help reduce pain in muscles and joints – especially helpful for arthritis.
3. Studies show regular gentle to moderate exercise strengthens the immune system (intense activities temporarily shut it down).
4. Exercise improves mood by sending more oxygen to the brain (which also aids in clearer thinking!), and it stimulates the “feel good,” “painkilling” hormones like endorphins.

5. Some types of exercise, like Pilates and yoga, are known for their core strengthening abilities. The core muscles include the abdominals, lower back and pelvic area. Strengthening these muscles deep in the torso can be helpful to those with Colitis or Crohn's disease.
6. The accomplishment felt after completing a workout or reaching an exercise goal is empowering! This is important for emotional health, often compromised by chronic illness.
7. Regular exercise promotes deeper sleep.
8. Exercise offers stress relief. A stronger circulatory system slows the heart rate, so it won't rise as high and as quickly in response to anxiety situations. As a result, you're able to keep your cool much easier.

Unfortunately, the chronic pain of most disorders combined with lack of sleep leads to exhaustion, which leads to physical inactivity. This deconditions and weakens the muscles, making the condition worse. Therefore, it's wise to do gentle exercise on your "better" days. Pace yourself. Experiment to see how much exercise is right for you. Consult your physician and a *Certified* Personal Trainer for advice.

Try small amounts of exercise or stretches throughout the day. Being overactive will drain you, but small amounts of light exercise will help improve energy levels by raising metabolic rate. If walking to the mailbox or even around the living room is too fatiguing, don't push yourself to do more than that at first. Keep walking that short distance each time you exercise, and soon you'll find you can take a few steps more. Anything is better than nothing.

Other suggestions to keep in mind;

1. Get adequate sleep when beginning your exercise program.
2. Drink enough water. Have one to two glasses before exercise and one or two after exercise to prevent dehydration. This is especially important with the dehydrating effects of Crohn's Disease or Colitis. Sip small amounts during exercise, too if you like.
3. Avoid exercising in intense heat.
4. Relaxation/exercise combinations may help lessen the intensity of symptoms. Activities like yoga or Tai chi improve the body's strength and endurance while relaxing the body simultaneously. Breathing exercises (meditating, relaxing and visualizing) are also beneficial in controlling chronic pain.
5. Aerobic activities are well tolerated by those with disorders such as fibromyalgia, arthritis, colitis, or Crohn's disease. However, aerobic exercise seems to cause relapses for many with CFS. In the early stages of the disorder, it's best to rest at first, and then attempt exercise when symptoms lessen over time. Researchers suspect CFS is linked to an error in energy metabolism. People with CFS seem better at tolerating stretching or non-aerobic types of exercise like weight training with very light weights. CFS sufferers should experiment cautiously with aerobic activities to see what intensity and time length they can tolerate.
6. Exercise tolerance can vary day to day. Don't be disappointed if you can't seem to tolerate the same routine as at your last exercise session. This is a common occurrence among healthy individuals too.

7. Pacing yourself is so important! Stop the activity before you feel tired. Take frequent breaks during your activity (like walking or riding your exercise bike). Take longer breaks between sets of your weight training exercises. Additionally, even for healthy people, an important factor in achieving and improving physical health is *not* how hard you push yourself. Rather it's how often you exercise. Try to do it regularly.
8. But having said that, avoid exercise during symptom flare-ups or if you develop a fever. Listen to your body. If you really feel you couldn't tolerate exercise today, then perhaps do light stretching instead. Expect muscle soreness when you initially begin an exercise program. Even healthy inactive people experience this. However, those with chronic illness may have longer-lasting soreness, particularly with fibromyalgia. To help reduce muscle soreness, stretch briefly before activity, and then spend more time stretching afterward. In addition, apply heat afterward, or soak in a warm bath or a hot tub. Post exercise soreness decreases over time, especially if you listen to your body and pace yourself. Some chronically ill people may always have some soreness, but it's better to be fit with a little pain, than unfit with lots of pain!
9. There's no need to join a gym. You can exercise in the privacy and convenience of your own home. This is comforting for those with colitis who need a bathroom close by. You can try bench stepping, riding an exercise bike, or using a treadmill. Consider also exercising to a DVD or video. Enjoy neighbourhood walks if you're comfortable venturing outside. For weight training exercises, use your body weight or improvise common household items like soup cans.
10. Be patient. It may take months, even years to slowly increase the intensity, duration, or frequency of an exercise program, especially for those with compromised health.

Today, I enjoy good health and an active lifestyle. However, even though it's been over 30 years since developing CFS, I still must monitor the intensity and length of my physical exertions. If I push myself too hard, I'm physically drained for a few days afterward.

There's no need to stress your body past your individual limit, even if you have good health. Exercise should be enjoyable too. So, get moving and have fun!

Eve Lees has been active in the health & fitness industry since 1979. Currently, she is a Freelance Health Writer for several publications and speaks to business and private groups on various health topics. www.artnews-healthnews.com