

Exercising for our mental health during COVID-19



What this fact sheet covers:

- The importance of exercise for health care workers during COVID-19
- Challenges related to COVID-19
- Tips for safely exercising during COVID-19
- Overcoming barriers to exercising

The importance of exercise for health care workers during COVID-19

Research shows that exercise has many benefits for physical health and mental health. Some of the physical impacts of exercise include:

- Fending off heart attacks and strokes
- Helping prevent diabetes
- Helping prevent cancer (or a recurrence of cancer)
- Supporting the brain

The positive impact of regular exercise on mental health is increasingly evident too. People who exercise regularly tend to do so because it gives them an enormous sense of well-being. They feel more energetic throughout the day, sleep better at night, have sharper memories, and feel more relaxed and positive throughout the day.

Running for 15 minutes a day or walking for an hour has been shown to reduce the risk of major depression by 26%. This is because exercise promotes changes in the brain, including neural growth, reduces inflammation, and new activity patterns that promote feelings of calm and well-being.

It also releases endorphins, the chemicals in our brain that energise us and make us feel good. And exercise can serve as a distraction, allowing you to find some quiet time to break out of the cycle of negative thoughts that feed depression. In similar ways, exercise is also a natural and effective anti-anxiety treatment.

Due to COVID-19, many people, particularly health care workers report feeling heightened levels of stress, anxiety, uncertainty, sleep disturbance, low mood and exhaustion.

In order to stay physically and mentally fit to perform the critical role that you play in the community; you need to look after yourself and exercise is a proven way of doing this.

Even if you weren't regularly exercising pre-COVID-19, now more than ever is the time to prioritise your health with daily exercise.

This is particularly critical given that this pandemic may well be here for an extended period of time, introducing potentially chronic levels of stress into the lives of health care workers.

Regular exercise can significantly reduce the impact of this stress on you.



The National Physical Activity Guidelines recommend:

- At least **30 minutes of moderate intensity** exercise on most (preferably all) days of the week. This could be a brisk walk where you notice a slight increase in breathing and heart rate.
- Exercising for **at least 10 minutes at a time**. The 30 minutes doesn't need to be continuous; it can be broken into 10-minute blocks throughout the day.
- Being **active in as many ways** as possible each day (e.g. using the stairs instead of a lift).
- For extra health benefits, if you are able to, you should also do **vigorous activity** that makes you 'huff and puff' (e.g. jogging, cycling, interval training). For best results, vigorous exercise should be done for at least 30 minutes 3-4 times a week. Vigorous exercise is particularly helpful because it makes you fitter and the fitter you are, the greater the efficiency with which your heart and lungs work to get oxygen delivered to and used by your muscles. Research clearly shows that the fitter you are, the more protected you are from developing most health problems.
- If you are very inactive, health benefits can be gained by becoming **slightly more active**.
- **The key message is that even a little physical activity is better than none at all, and more is better than a little.**

Exercise challenges during COVID-19

COVID-19 has presented unique challenges to exercising. With gyms, group fitness classes, swimming pools and some beaches closed due to COVID-19, you might not have access to your favourite exercise pursuits.

If you're isolating or doing shift work, you might not be able to go outside to walk, run or cycle. If you're a health care worker working increased hours and experiencing stress or exhaustion due to COVID-19, exercise might be the last thing you feel like doing.

While COVID-19 might have impacted your usual routine, there are plenty of safe ways to continue or begin to get the benefits of regular exercise.

Tips for safely exercising during COVID-19

Firstly, check the latest guidelines for your area, as these are changing frequently. For most people, the following exercises are safe and legal:

- **Walking, jogging, or riding a bike** outside in your local area (whilst maintaining a safe distance from others). Experiment with different routes that are less populated and explore your local area.
- Many fitness trainers and yoga instructors have moved their **classes online** for free or at low cost. There are plenty of great classes that require minimal or no equipment and can be done in a limited space at any time of the day or night. Check out your phone's app store, YouTube or online subscription services for the one that's suitable for you.
- **Gardening and yard work** are also good options, particularly if you are isolating.
- **Skipping** (solo or jump-rope with your family) is a fun activity that requires minimal space, just a rope and gets your heart rate up in no time.
- **Tennis**, which is currently limited to singles in most places is a great sport to play and gives you a good workout - whilst maintaining a safe distance and hygiene levels
- If you have **stairs** in your house or local area, walking or running up them several times is a quick and effective way to get the benefits of more intense exercise
- Learn a **dance routine** on YouTube or Tik Tok. Get the whole family involved and record it and share it with family and friends.



- There are plenty of exercises that use your own **bodyweight** and can be done indoors, such as lunges, squats, pushups, tricep dips, step-ups, sit-ups and planking.
- **Move around the house more.** Walk while you're making calls. Squat while you wait for the microwave or the kettle to boil.

Overcoming barriers to exercising

Make a plan: At the start of the week, look at your schedule and plan when and what you will do each day and write this in your calendar/scheduler or set a reminder alarm on your phone. Scheduling when you will exercise is important for staying accountable and reduces the burden of decision-making each day.

Set and track your goals: Your goal might be to achieve 10,000 steps a day, or it might be to achieve a new skill, such as one full push-up.

Use a pedometer or record your activity levels and progress in a diary. Reward yourself when you achieve the goals you set for the week. Buy yourself new activewear, have a warm bath, or light your favourite candle.

Bounce back: If you deviated from your plan one week, be forgiving of yourself. Learn from what happened, and try and think of ways you will overcome those barriers next week, then write the current week off.

Start from where you left off without guilt or judgement, just enthusiasm to work towards your goals this week.

Change your focus: If your favourite exercise is unavailable at the moment, it's normal to feel uninspired, frustrated or that you aren't getting the same results as you were pre-COVID-19.

If that's the case, try and remind yourself of the many benefits of exercise for your wellbeing right now, and that doing the best you can with what's available will help you bounce back quickly. It might not be as fun or intense as what you were used to, but something is always better than nothing!

Make it fun: Try and choose exercise that you enjoy. Associating exercise with something you enjoy, like calling a friend on your walk home, seeing the sunrise/sunset, or listening to your favourite music or podcast helps if you are struggling to find an activity you enjoy.

Prepare for challenges: Consider situations that will make it hard for you to exercise and write down solutions to each. E.g. If it rains when you have a walk scheduled, have a wet weather alternative prepared or a raincoat on hand.

Compromise: If you only have 15 minutes when you had planned a 30-minute walk, go for a 15-minute walk, even brief bursts of exercise have positive results.

Get advice: If you are new to exercise, pregnant, a smoker, or overweight, or have heart disease or major health problems, it is recommended that you seek medical advice before commencing an exercise program. Your GP is a great place to start.

This document may be freely downloaded and distributed on condition no change is made to the content. The information in this document is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Not to be used for commercial purposes and not to be hosted electronically outside of the Black Dog Institute website.

For information: blackdoginstitute.org.au



[blackdoginst](https://blackdoginstitute.org.au)



[@blackdogins](https://twitter.com/blackdogins)



[/BlackDogInst](https://www.youtube.com/BlackDogInst)

