

# Physical activity and exercise

Factsheet 529LP  
June 2019



Being physically active can make a big difference when you have dementia. It can help you to live well and stay healthy and can help with your mental as well as your physical health and improve your quality of life at all stages of the condition. Physical activity can include anything that gets you moving and using energy. This includes sport and fitness activities that might commonly be thought of as exercise, as well as other activities such as walking, gardening or dancing.

This factsheet explains why being physically active is important for you. It covers how being active can improve your mental abilities and how you feel emotionally as well as your physical wellbeing. It describes the types of activity you can do and gives different ideas for exercises and activities, and how intensive they are. It also includes advice about how much activity is appropriate.

## Contents

- How does physical activity help?
  - Physical benefits
  - Psychological benefits
- Getting started – things to think about
- Different types of activity
- Examples of activities and exercise
  - How much activity should you do?
  - Physical activity if you have mobility difficulties
  - Less intensive physical activities
  - Moderate physical activities
  - Vigorous physical activities
- Other useful organisations

# Physical activity and exercise

## How does physical activity help?

Physical activity is an important part of a healthy lifestyle and can help your overall wellbeing. It can give you opportunities to spend time with other people and support you to be independent, which is good both for you and others. It can also help you to feel more positive and mean you're more likely to keep doing the things you enjoy.

Physical activity may improve some aspects of memory, such as helping to have clearer memories of certain events, both for people with dementia as well as those not living with the condition. It may also help to lower the risk of a person developing the condition at all. However, physical activity has not been shown to slow down or prevent dementia from progressing once a person has the condition.

## Physical benefits

Some examples of how activity and exercise benefit you physically include:

- improving the health of your heart and blood vessels, which can reduce the risk of high blood pressure and heart disease
- reducing the risk of some types of cancer (especially breast and colon cancer), stroke and type 2 diabetes
- improving your physical fitness – maintaining strong muscles and flexible joints can help you to stay independent (which can include enabling you to do daily activities like dressing, cleaning and cooking)
- improving hand-eye coordination (the ability to use what you see to move your hands in response, for example eating, tying laces or hitting a ball when playing tennis)
- helping to keep bones strong and reducing the risk of osteoporosis (a disease that affects the bones, making them weak and more likely to break)
- improving sleep
- reducing the risk of falls by improving strength and balance.

## Psychological benefits

Being active physically also contributes to mental and emotional health by:

- improving mental abilities – some studies have shown that exercise might improve focus and attention
- improving self-confidence and self-esteem
- providing opportunities to talk to others, helping to prevent you feeling isolated
- improving your mood.

## Getting started – things to think about

If you want to start doing more physical activity, there are lots of things to consider. This includes how much and how regularly you exercise already. Also think about what you feel able to do. For instance if you're a younger person with dementia (under 65 years old) or have exercised regularly for years, you may be able to do more than someone older or who hasn't been very physically active. Also think about the things you prefer doing and any specific needs you have.

If you haven't done any exercise for a long time it's best to talk to your GP, a physiotherapist or another healthcare professional before starting any new exercise or physical activity. We describe different types of activity in the next section.

If you have other health conditions, it doesn't necessarily mean you can't do any activity – in some cases it may even help to be active. However, you should talk to a healthcare professional (for example a GP or physiotherapist) about your plans for exercise and activity if you have any of the following:

- heart problems
- high blood pressure
- unexplained chest pain
- dizziness or fainting
- bone or joint problems
- breathing problems
- balance problems
- frequent falls.

You should only ever exercise as much as you feel able to. If you overdo it, this can be bad for your health. For instance, too much activity for you could lead to problems such as sprains, dizziness or falls.

Pay attention to your body. If, when you exercise or do something active, you are in pain or feel unwell or are short of breath, stop doing this activity. You should then speak to your GP.

It's important to do activities that you find enjoyable and suitable, in the way that works for you. You may prefer to do these activities on your own, with a friend, or in a group. It's a good idea to try different activities to see what works best for you. You could also look at opportunities to get sponsored for taking part in an activity, such as cycling, running or walking. This can be a great way to be active while raising money for Alzheimer's Society. For more information go to **[alzheimers.org.uk/events](https://alzheimers.org.uk/events)**

## Different types of activity

You might have your own favourite physical activities and exercise. If you already take part in certain sports or other activities, continue doing them for as long as you can. You may need to adapt how you do them at some point, but having dementia doesn't mean you need to stop doing what you enjoy.

However, you may also want to try new ways of being active. There are a few examples at the bottom of this page. They are categorised by how intensive they are. Each level of activity causes the body to react differently and so will be suitable for different people, for example:

- less intensive activities tend to be gentler and may be suitable if you have limited mobility or fitness
- moderate physical activities generally make you breathe faster and feel warmer. While doing these, you will be able to talk but shouldn't be able to sing the words to a song
- more intensive (vigorous) physical activities make you breathe hard and fast, and you'll be unable to say more than a few words without pausing for breath.

Here are some examples of the levels and different types of physical activity:

### Less intensive

- seated exercises
- Tai chi/Qigong
- yoga/Pilates
- indoor bowls/skittles

### Moderate

- brisk walking
- riding a bike on level ground
- doubles tennis
- volleyball
- basketball

### **Vigorous (more intensive)**

- jogging or running
- riding a bike fast or up a hill
- singles tennis
- football or rugby
- hockey.

There is more information about each of these types of activity, with examples, on the next few pages. This includes the benefits these activities can have both for your health and in other ways, as well as how you may be able to adapt them according to what you feel able to do. When you're choosing activities it's a good idea to think about:

- how mobile you are
- your fitness levels
- whether you want to exercise alone or with other people
- looking for dementia-friendly groups or classes if these would be helpful.

Thinking about the type of exercise you want to do is also useful. For instance, cardiovascular ('cardio') exercise is any type of exercise that raises your heart rate. It's good for improving how your heart and lungs work, as well as other parts of your body that help blood circulate. Weights-based or strength exercises are more focused on making muscles stronger. It's a good idea to try and do a combination of these activities if you're able to.

You can also find more information on the NHS website or from the organisations listed under 'Other useful organisations' (see page 16).

## Examples of activities and exercise

Try to find activities that work for you so that you can enjoy yourself while getting the benefits of exercise, for both your physical health and psychological wellbeing. To help you with this, on the following pages you can find examples of different activities from gentle to higher intensity.

There are many other types of exercise and ways to keep active that you might be interested in. You could look at different local gyms and leisure centres to see what they offer. You can also ask your local Alzheimer's Society if they have more information about activity groups or places offering different types of exercise available in your area. Alternatively use our online dementia directory on [alzheimers.org.uk/dementiadirectory](https://alzheimers.org.uk/dementiadirectory) to see what's available locally.

### How much activity should you do?

As a guide, it's a good idea to aim for around 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity (such as brisk walking or golf – see pages 11 and 13) every week, as well as strength exercises if possible on two or more days a week. Alternatively, you can aim for 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity (such as running or dancing – see pages 14 and 15). These are the guidelines set by NHS England. However, you should do as much or as little as you feel comfortable with – these recommendations are something to aim for only if you feel able to do so.



## Physical activity if you have mobility difficulties

There are a number of ways to keep active even if you have mobility difficulties. Here are some examples.

- For an exercise to try in the bedroom – move your hips to shuffle along the edge of a bed, in a sitting position, from one end of the bed to the other. This helps exercise the muscles needed for standing up from a chair.
- Another exercise for the bedroom is to lie as flat as possible on a bed for 20–30 minutes each day, trying to reduce the gap between the curve of your back and the bed. This allows for a good stretch, strengthens abdominal muscles and gives your neck muscles a chance to relax.
- To help with balance and posture – try standing up and staying balanced. Hold on to a support if you need to. This can be done at the same time as everyday activities, for example when you're doing the washing up.
- Sit unsupported and upright for a few minutes each day – you could sit on a seat with no back or a bed. This exercise helps to strengthen the stomach and back muscles used to support posture. You might want to ask someone to stay with you for this.
- Stand up and move about regularly. Moving regularly helps to keep leg muscles strong and maintain good balance.

## Less intensive physical activities

If moderate or vigorous activities aren't suitable for you, you may want to try lighter activities. Some examples are explained here.

### Seated exercises

Seated exercises help with muscle strength and balance and may be better for anyone who finds standing exercises more difficult. However, these can put a lot of strain on the lower back, so it's best to speak to the GP before trying these.

Some examples of seated exercises include:

- marching with your feet
- turning your upper body from side to side
- raising your heels and toes
- raising your arms towards the ceiling
- raising your opposite arm and leg
- straightening your legs together or in turn
- clapping under your legs
- cycling your legs
- making circles with your arms
- moving from sitting to standing.

The British Gymnastics Foundation has a dementia-friendly seated gymnastics programme. For more information see 'Other useful organisations' on page 16.

### Tai chi/Qigong

Tai chi and Qigong are gentle forms of Chinese martial arts that combine simple physical movements and meditation, and aim to improve balance and health. The movements concentrate on a series of exercises. These forms of exercise focus on balance and stability, which are important for being able to move without difficulty and can reduce the risk of falls.

### Yoga/Pilates

Similar to Tai chi and Qigong, both yoga and Pilates are forms of exercise that can improve balance and stability, as well as overall strength. They can also help improve how flexible you are and increase how far and easily you can stretch. This is known as your 'range of motion'.

There are a number of dementia-friendly classes for both yoga and Pilates around the UK. For more information contact Age UK (see 'Other useful organisations' on page 16).

### Indoor bowls or skittles

Indoor bowls and skittles can help with balance and hand-eye co-ordination, and provide good opportunities for meeting and interacting with other people. As the movements are quite slow it reduces the risk of injury. Some local leisure centres offer indoor bowls sessions, or you can buy sets from toy or sports stores.

### Moderate physical activities

The following are more likely to be moderate aerobic activities. As explained on page 6, an activity is moderate if it makes you breathe faster and feel warmer. You'll still be able to talk but not sing the words to a song.

### Walking

Walking can help you to build stamina and make your heart healthier, as well as helping you to lose weight. It's one of the most accessible forms of exercise if you're able to do it. It's simple, free, does not need specialist equipment, and can be done anywhere.

You can vary how far or for how long you walk according to how fit you are. You can also take different routes to make the walk more or less difficult. Walking can also be a social activity – you can do it with a friend or join a walking group, which some leisure centres and other organisations have. These are usually supported by a walk leader and arrange walks of various lengths (see details for Ramblers in 'Other useful organisations' on page 16).

Many people with dementia also take part in Alzheimer's Society's Memory Walk – a sponsored walk for all ages and abilities to unite together to raise money to defeat dementia. For more information go to **[memorywalk.org.uk](http://memorywalk.org.uk)**

### Gardening

Gardening may help to strengthen your muscles and improve your breathing. Many people see it as an opportunity to get outdoors and do something meaningful and enjoyable. You might have your own garden, but if not there are a number of other ways to take part in gardening activities. There may be allotments in your local area, and there are also local organisations and schemes that offer the opportunity to work in community gardens. For more information on these see Thrive under 'Other useful organisations' on page 16.

You can vary the activity level according to what you feel able to do. This means you could do something that requires less exertion like weeding or pruning, or a more intensive activity like raking or mowing the grass.

### Gym

Gyms have a range of exercise equipment to help with your overall fitness as well as strengthening muscles. Some people prefer going to a gym to other forms of exercise as they can work out at their own pace and in their own time. Other people enjoy it more as a social activity, going with other people or taking part in exercise classes.

You can adapt your activities at the gym based on what you prefer and feel able to do. For example, if you find it difficult to move around, you may prefer to use equipment like an exercise bike so you can exercise your legs while staying seated.

### Swimming

Swimming works a lot of muscles at once. There is also some evidence that it may improve balance and reduce the risk of falls.

Many people also find the sensation of being in the water soothing and calming. You can vary the speed and duration of each swim so it can be as intensive or as light as you wish. Some pools also offer dementia-friendly swimming classes which are quieter, and are facilitated by trained staff. See 'Dementia Friendly Swimming Hub' under 'Other useful organisations' on page 16.

If you're a beginner or haven't been swimming for a while, you might enjoy going swimming with someone else.

### Golf

Golf can help with balance as well as overall cardiovascular health because of the amount of walking it involves. It can be a more relaxing form of exercise, and a chance to be active outside. Some people also enjoy the opportunity to compete and play with other people.

Some organisations arrange structured sessions for people with dementia, which can include group warm-ups and putting challenges, as well as games of golf of various lengths – for example, nine holes.

### Table tennis

Table tennis can help you to maintain hand-eye co-ordination. It can be a good opportunity for spending time with other people too.

You can adapt table tennis in a number of ways according to what you're able to do. For instance, you can play it either sitting down or standing up. Some organisations have introduced specially adapted tables which include features like curved edges and high contrast colours to make the ball and markings easier to see. See BAT Foundation under 'Other useful organisations' on page 16 for more information.

### Tennis

Tennis has a number of benefits, including increasing your stamina, balance and co-ordination. Like other sports it can also provide a good opportunity for spending time with other people.

You may want to play doubles or singles tennis depending on how intensive you need the activity to be. Doubles tennis is usually a moderate activity while singles tennis is usually a lot more intensive.

Some tennis clubs have specially adapted courts and equipment such as tactile court lines, and some also have special 'quiet times' during the day.

### Vigorous physical activities

The following aerobic activities are more likely to be vigorous. As explained on page 6, these activities will make you breathe hard and fast, and mean you can't say more than a few words before you're out of breath.

#### Riding a bike

Cycling can help with posture, co-ordination and balance. It's a very flexible activity that you can adapt to best suit your needs and abilities. It's up to you to decide how fast you ride, how far and where you go. You might stick to flat ground or take on more hilly or challenging routes. There are a number of cycling clubs, including some indoor classes designed specifically for people with dementia.

#### Jogging or running

These activities are forms of cardiovascular exercise, and can help with your mood as well as keeping your weight under control.

Jogging and running, like walking, need very little equipment. However it's best to wear a pair of well-fitting, supportive running shoes.

If you haven't run much previously, it's important to slowly ease yourself into it, and then increase the distance you run and the pace gradually over time. Warming up and stretching is also very important. The NHS has information on running on their website – see 'Other useful organisations' on page 16.

## Dancing

Dancing can have a number of benefits, including:

- increasing strength and flexibility
- helping with staying steady and agile which may reduce the risk of falls
- reducing stress.

Dancing can often be very social. It can be done in different ways, ranging from tea dances and couple or group sessions to more improvised movement involving ribbons, balls, or hoops. You can also make dance moves in a seated position, so even if you have mobility difficulties you can still enjoy it. There are a number of dementia-friendly dance fitness classes around the UK, as well as other classes which might be suitable such as Zumba Gold – a lower intensity version of Zumba.

## Aerobics classes

Aerobics is usually fairly intensive, and gives a good cardiovascular workout as well as helping with co-ordination.

Aerobic classes are another sociable way to exercise. Gyms usually offer different classes for different levels of fitness. There are also a number of dementia-friendly classes across the UK.

## Team sports (such as football, netball, rugby or hockey)

Team sports like these can help improve cardiovascular fitness, co-ordination, balance, and increase strength. They also provide opportunities to be social.

There are also less intensive versions of some of these sports. For instance, some sports groups offer dementia-friendly walking football sessions.

## Other useful organisations

### Age UK

0800 055 6112 (advice line, 8am–7pm)

[www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)

### Wales – Age Cymru

0300 303 44 98 (advice line, 9am–4pm Monday–Friday)

[advice@agecymru.org.uk](mailto:advice@agecymru.org.uk)

[www.agecymru.org.uk](http://www.agecymru.org.uk)

### Northern Ireland – Age NI

0808 808 7575 (advice line, 9am–5pm Monday–Friday)

[advice@ageni.org](mailto:advice@ageni.org)

[www.ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland)

Age UK, Age Cymru and Age NI provide information and advice for older people in the UK.

### BAT (Bounce Alzheimer’s Therapy) Foundation

07982 813106

[www.batfoundation.com](http://www.batfoundation.com)

BAT Foundation is a health and wellbeing charity delivering a national table tennis Alzheimer’s therapy programme.

### British Gymnastics Foundation

[www.britishgymnasticsfoundation.org](http://www.britishgymnasticsfoundation.org)

The British Gymnastics Foundation has developed a seated exercise programme called ‘Love to Move’. You can download guidelines on this from its website.



### **Dementia Friendly Swimming Hub**

dementiafriendly@swimming.org

[www.swimming.org/dementiafriendly](http://www.swimming.org/dementiafriendly)

The Dementia Friendly Swimming Hub was developed by Swim England to enhance the swimming experience of those living with dementia and their carers by improving facilities and removing barriers.

### **Jabadao**

01473 328330

[info@jabadao.org](mailto:info@jabadao.org)

[www.jabadao.org](http://www.jabadao.org)

Jabadao offers courses and resources to enhance communication and wellbeing in people with dementia and carers, using dance-type movement.

### **Keep Fit Association (KFA)**

01403 266000

[kfa@emduk.org](mailto:kfa@emduk.org)

[www.keepfit.org.uk](http://www.keepfit.org.uk)

KFA offers people the opportunity to meet in a spirit of fun to exercise together. It offers a range of classes, including dedicated classes to people over 50, across the UK.

### **NHS**

[www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

The UK's biggest health website, which includes information on different levels and types of activity.

## **Thrive**

0118 988 5688

[info@thrive.org.uk](mailto:info@thrive.org.uk)

[www.thrive.org.uk](http://www.thrive.org.uk)

Thrive uses gardening to bring about positive changes in the lives of people with health conditions including dementia. It runs gardening programmes at regional centres and also in the community.

## **Ramblers**

[www.ramblers.org.uk](http://www.ramblers.org.uk)

Ramblers is England's largest network of health walks, helping people to lead a more active lifestyle.

This publication contains information and general advice. It should not be used as a substitute for personalised advice from a qualified professional. Alzheimer's Society does not accept any liability arising from its use. We strive to ensure that the content is accurate and up to date, but information can change over time. Please refer to our website for the latest version and for full terms and conditions.

© Alzheimer's Society, 2022. All rights reserved. Except for personal use, no part of this work may be distributed, reproduced, downloaded, transmitted or stored in any form without the written permission of Alzheimer's Society.

## Factsheet 529LP

Last reviewed: June 2019

Next review due: June 2022

Our information is based on evidence and need, and is regularly updated using quality-controlled processes. It is reviewed by experts in health and social care and people affected by dementia.

Reviewed by: Dr Elizabeth Coulthard, Consultant Senior Lecturer, Institute of Clinical Neurosciences at University of Bristol and North Bristol NHS Trust, Professor Tom Dening, Professor of Dementia Research, Institute of Mental Health at University of Nottingham, and Ryan Cooper, Senior Musculoskeletal and Orthopaedic Physiotherapist

This factsheet has also been reviewed by people affected by dementia.

To give feedback on this factsheet, or for a list of sources, please email [publications@alzheimers.org.uk](mailto:publications@alzheimers.org.uk)

People affected by dementia need our support more than ever. With your help we can continue to provide the vital services, information and advice they need.

To make a single or monthly donation, please call us on **0330 333 0804** or go to [alzheimers.org.uk/donate](https://alzheimers.org.uk/donate)

**We are Alzheimer's Society. We are a vital source of support and a powerful force for change for everyone affected by dementia. We provide help and hope.**

For support and advice, call us on **0333 150 3456** or visit [alzheimers.org.uk](https://alzheimers.org.uk)



Alzheimer's Society operates in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Registered charity number 296645.

