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## Being active with Crohn's or Colitis

### Key facts about being active with Crohn's or Colitis

- Exercising with Crohn's or Colitis is safe and shouldn't cause a flare-up.
- Being active can help reduce fatigue and improve mental wellbeing.
- Adults should try to do 150 minutes (two and a half hours) of moderate intensity exercise every week.
- You should avoid strenuous exercise for at least the first 4-6 weeks after an operation. After that build your activity levels up slowly.
- Belts and girdles can help support tummy muscles if exercising with a stoma.

It is not always easy to be physically active if you're living with Crohn's or Colitis. But being active is important for our physical and mental health. It is safe to be physically active or to exercise with Crohn's or Colitis. Current research suggests it does not cause flare-ups.

You might find it difficult to be active if your Crohn's or Colitis is severe. Symptoms like tummy or joint pain, fatigue, or urgently needing to poo can get in the way. For some people, being active can trigger these symptoms. But most people with Crohn's or Colitis say exercising makes them feel better. Some said they have more energy, better sleep and fewer gut symptoms.

Being active can improve mental wellbeing and quality of life, as well as reducing fatigue. Being active may also have positive effects on your condition, such as reducing the risk of a flare-up. Scientists believe regular exercise could help reduce inflammation in Crohn's or Colitis. This has been seen in other long-term illnesses, but more research is needed to know for sure.



Most research on exercise has involved people in remission or with mildly active Crohn's or Colitis, who were doing low or moderate intensity activities. Moderate intensity exercise is when your heart rate increases and you can talk, but not sing. Examples include brisk walking or cycling.

Higher intensity exercise is when you breathe harder and cannot say more than a few words without pausing for breath. Examples include running, aerobics or playing football. We do not know much about higher intensity exercise in people with Crohn's or Colitis. But early research shows it can be safe and enjoyable.

UK guidelines recommend that adults try to do:

- At least 150 minutes (two and a half hours) of moderate intensity activity every week, including:
- Muscle strengthening exercises on two or more days a week that work all the major muscle groups (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders and arms)

This includes older adults and those who are pregnant or disabled. There are no specific recommendations for exercising with Crohn's or Colitis. It will probably depend on how active your condition is and your symptoms at the time.

If you're not very active or your symptoms are making it difficult, try to build up your activity levels slowly. Walk to the shops instead of taking the car, use the stairs instead of the lift. Even sitting down less during the day can help. But be kind to yourself. If you're not feeling up to it, don't put pressure on yourself.

If you're struggling to increase your physical activity, talk to your IBD team or GP. They may be able to suggest ideas to help you, based on your personal situation.

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## **Exercise following surgery**

Having surgery for Crohn's or Colitis can be a shock to your body, mentally and physically. You may find our pages on [surgery for Crohn's Disease](#) and [surgery for Ulcerative Colitis](#) useful.



Following any surgery, you will be encouraged to move as much as you can. To begin with this may mean getting out of bed into a chair, followed by slowly walking. It is normal to feel your wound stretch when you stand up to walk. You should avoid any strenuous exercise for at least a few weeks after your surgery. This includes housework and lifting anything heavier than a full kettle for at least the first four to six weeks. This is so your wounds can heal properly. If you've had a stoma surgery, you may need to wait longer before lifting anything heavy. Ask your stoma nurse or surgical team for advice specific to you.

In the meantime, you can try gentle chair and standing exercises. Exercise should not cause pain, although it might be uncomfortable. Start slowly and increase your activity as you feel able. You should aim to be able to walk 30 minutes a day two to three months after your operation.

Having major abdominal surgery affects the muscles in the tummy. This in turn affects your core stability. Core stability is important for balance and good posture. Core stability exercises can help prevent tummy pain, backache and hernias. Hernias are bulges under the skin which happen if the gut pushes through gaps in muscles. Hernias are more likely to form after surgery.

The York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals have produced a [leaflet](#) with some examples of core stability exercises you could try.

## Swimming

Your surgical team, IBD team or GP can advise you when it is safe for you to go swimming. This may depend on the type of surgery you've had and what type of swimming you would like to do. There is some information on [swimming after surgery](#) on the NHS website which may be helpful.

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## Exercising with a stoma

Having a stoma should not stop you doing the exercise you enjoy. In fact, many people find they can go back to doing the things they used to before their operation. Once you



have recovered from surgery, your stoma nurse might give you exercises to build up your tummy muscles and prevent hernias.

Build up the amount of exercise you do gradually. Do not rush or expect too much of yourself too quickly. For heavier activities, you could wear a belt or girdle to support your stoma and tummy muscles. Your stoma nurse can tell you when you can start playing contact sports again.

Read our information on [living with a stoma](#) for more support and information.

## Swimming

Stoma bags are waterproof so you can go swimming if you want to. You can get filter covers to stop the filters getting wet. Some people like to use a smaller stoma bag when swimming. If you want to cover up your stoma bag, you can buy covers in different colours and patterns. You can also get swimwear that is specially designed for people who have a stoma.

Colostomy UK have more information in their booklet: [Active Ostomates- Sport and fitness after stoma surgery.](#)

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## Protein supplements

Some people like to take protein supplements, such as protein shakes, as part of their exercise routine. There is not much evidence on the effect of protein supplements in people with Crohn's or Colitis. Some research suggests whey protein may help with gut inflammation. But other evidence suggests a diet too high in protein can cause a flare-up. Protein supplements are highly processed and contain a lot of ingredients. Some of these might cause side effects if you take them for a long time. If you can, it's better to get protein from food rather than supplements. This also helps you get other nutrients your body needs. Protein rich foods include eggs, cheese, meat, fish and pulses. If you choose to use protein supplements, check the ingredients. Different supplements contain different sources of protein, such as dairy versus plant based. Choose one that is suitable for you. For example, if dairy makes your symptoms worse avoid dairy based



proteins, such as whey. Follow the instructions on the packet and mix the supplement with the right amount of water.

Read our [Food](#) resource for more information on how to eat well with Crohn's or Colitis.

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## Sports stars with Crohn's or Colitis

There are lots of successful sports personalities who have Crohn's or Colitis. You can find out more about our sports ambassadors [here](#).

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## Your top tips

Here are some tips from people living with Crohn's or Colitis about exercising well with these conditions.

"I walk or run depending upon how I feel. My tip is not to put pressure on yourself if you are in flare-up. My other tip is to find an activity you enjoy, as you are more likely to do it."

"Listen to your body! Some days the no inside your brain is lack of motivation, other days it's a NO you're not able to do this today, it'll cause more harm than good. And that's okay. Look after yourself."

"If I'm on the edge of a flare-up or having a bad day with multiple symptoms, intense exercise (running / team sports / HIIT classes etc) can tip me over the edge. That said, prioritising movement, no matter how small, is key to keeping myself well day to day."

"Whatever you do is better than doing nothing. Keeping fit has helped me to fight my condition and lead a full life. Sometimes the hardest step is the first one. You've got this."

"Think about hydration! It can be easy to get dehydrated so hydrating properly before, after and during a marathon or long distance event is key."

"When I go to a class, with lots of people, I like to tell the instructor, in private, that I have colitis. This gives me a bit of peace of mind, because if I need to leave for the toilet, the instructor knows why. I also give plenty of time, after a meal, to go to the toilet before



hitting the gym, so I don't get anxious while at it. But most of all, I focus on activities I really enjoy, so the excitement of the class overcomes any anxiety and toilet needs, which can be triggered by it. And be kind to yourself. If you need to stop an activity to use the toilet, don't feel bad or embarrassed, we are just human and probably no one will notice you're struggling.”

“We are strong mentally with what we deal with day to day and training has so much to do with mental toughness, so we are already winning.”

“Try to find an activity that offers a physical reward as well as mental, bouldering is a fantastic problem-solving sport that helps to improve mental wellbeing as well as offering a great all round workout!”

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## Finding services

There are lots of different ways to be active. And it's important to remember that exercising does not have to be expensive. Going to your local park or following a YouTube video are great and free ways to build movement into your day. Your local leisure centre may have details of exercise classes or local sports clubs that you could join. To find sports facilities near you there is a national search tool for England on the [NHS website](#). Choose 'find other services'. Then select 'sports and fitness services' and enter your postcode.

Some councils have local schemes for people with long-term conditions. You may also find it useful to search online for accessible and disability sports in your local area. You can check what's available at your local leisure centre, community centre or council here:

- [Find your local Active Partnership \(England only\)](#)
- [Find your local council \(GOV.UK\)](#)

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## Other organisations

NHS Get Active

<https://www.nhs.uk/better-health/get-active/>



NHS Live Well

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/exercise-guidelines/>

NHS Physiotherapy

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/physiotherapy/>

Sport England

[https://www.sportengland.org/jointhemovement#get\\_active\\_at\\_home](https://www.sportengland.org/jointhemovement#get_active_at_home)

Ileostomy and Internal Pouch Association – Exercise for Ostomates

<https://iasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Exercise.pdf>

We Are Undefeatable (Supporting people with long term health conditions to be active)

<https://weareundefeatable.co.uk/>

Activity Alliance (A national charity and leading voice for disabled people in sport and activity)

<https://www.activityalliance.org.uk/>

Scope (disability equality charity)

<https://www.scope.org.uk/advice-and-support/disability-sport/>

The Ramblers (Britain's walking charity)

<https://www.ramblers.org.uk/>

Paths for All (Scotland's network of walking for health groups)

<https://www.pathsforall.org.uk/>

Walking for Health groups NI

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/walking-health-groups-health-and-social-care-trusts>

Walk NI (interactive map of walking trails in Northern Ireland)



<https://www.walkni.com/>

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## Help and support from Crohn's & Colitis UK

We're here for you whenever you need us. Our award-winning information on Crohn's Disease, Ulcerative Colitis, and other forms of Inflammatory Bowel Disease have the information you need to help you manage your condition.

We have information on a wide range of topics, from individual medicines to coping with symptoms and concerns about relationships and employment. We'll help you find answers, access support and take control.

All information is available on our website: [crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/information](https://crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/information)

Our Helpline is a confidential service providing information and support to anyone affected by Crohn's or Colitis.

Our team can:

- Help you understand more about Crohn's and Colitis, diagnosis and treatment options
- Provide information to help you live well with your condition
- Help you understand and access disability benefits
- Be there to listen if you need someone to talk to
- Help you to find support from others living with the condition

Call us on 0300 222 5700 or email [helpline@crohnsandcolitis.org.uk](mailto:helpline@crohnsandcolitis.org.uk).

See our website for LiveChat: [crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/livechat](https://crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/livechat).

### Crohn's & Colitis UK Forum

This closed-group community on Facebook is for everyone affected by Crohn's or Colitis.

You can share your experiences and receive support from others at:

[facebook.com/groups/CCUKforum](https://facebook.com/groups/CCUKforum).

### Help with toilet access when out





Members of Crohn's & Colitis UK get benefits including a Can't Wait Card and a RADAR key to unlock accessible toilets. This card shows that you have a medical condition, and will help when you need urgent access to the toilet when you are out. See [crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/membership](https://crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/membership) for more information, or call the Membership Team on **01727 734465**.

Crohn's & Colitis UK information is research-based and produced with patients, medical advisers and other professionals. They are prepared as general information and are not intended to replace advice from your own doctor or other professional. We do not endorse any products mentioned.

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## About Crohn's & Colitis UK

We are Crohn's & Colitis UK, a national charity fighting for improved lives today – and a world free from Crohn's and Colitis tomorrow. To improve diagnosis and treatment, and to fund research into a cure; to raise awareness and to give people hope, comfort and confidence to live freer, fuller lives. We're here for everyone affected by Crohn's and Colitis.

This information is available for free thanks to the generosity of our supporters and members. Find out how you can join the fight against Crohn's and Colitis: call **01727 734465** or visit [crohnsandcolitis.org.uk](https://crohnsandcolitis.org.uk).

## About our information

Crohn's & Colitis UK information is research-based and produced with patients, medical advisers and other professionals. They are prepared as general information and are not intended to replace advice from your own doctor or other professional. We do not endorse any products mentioned.

We hope that you've found this information helpful. You can email the Knowledge and Information Team at [evidence@crohnsandcolitis.org.uk](mailto:evidence@crohnsandcolitis.org.uk) if:

- You have any comments or suggestions for improvements



- You would like more information about the research on which the information is based
- You would like details of any conflicts of interest

You can also write to us at **Crohn's & Colitis UK, 1 Bishops Square, Hatfield, Herts, AL10 9NE** or contact us through the **Helpline: 0300 222 5700**.

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