Te kori tinana

Exercise and Pain Management

There is strong evidence of the benefits of exercise for chronic pain. Introducing your body to a range of low level, low impact exercises is a gentle way to build strength and fitness whilst minimizing any flare-ups. The exercises you eventually adopt should be designed for your home environment or in a setting conducive to physical activity; no complicated gadgets or equipment is necessary.

*Tip: Keeping an exercise diary is a great way to keep track of your activity. Try a few exercises initially, and perform every day. Gradually repeat each activity more often as you become stronger and fitter.*

The two main components of ‘fitness’ that research has shown to be beneficial for people with chronic pain are building strength and cardiovascular fitness.

Strength training is important because pain causes our muscles to decondition. It often interferes with our physical activities – going for walks, using the stairs, cleaning the house. A couple of days in bed, as may be during a flare-up, causes muscle to lose bulk and strength. A phenomenon called ‘pain inhibition’ can cause activation delays or reduced strength. This subconscious process protects the body and will prevent us from lifting heavy weight with a broken arm, for example. There is a dose relationship between exercise and building strength. The aim is for you to gradually increase the repetitions to get to eight repetitions for each of the strength exercises. You’ll get more out of the exercises if you focus on how to do them rather than how often. We also encourage you to try and do the exercises daily.

Cardiovascular fitness has many benefits, one of these is to improve our energy levels. Being in pain undermines our physical fitness; it requires more energy to get through the day. We often know we need to exercise, but that can cause a lot of pain, so our focus is on how we do this. Some research indicates that 12 minutes of increasing cardiac output (which is physical activity that leads to an increase in heart rate) a day leads to an improvement in our fitness levels within three weeks. So, 12 minutes a day is what we will be aiming for! Research is increasingly showing that exercise is just as beneficial if broken up rather than completed in one go. Feel free to break up any of the fitness exercises into smaller chunks.

Whether that works for you at home, or if you prefer to go for a six minute bike ride and complete three other two minute sessions, this will be entirely up to you. The goal is for 12 minutes daily, you may need to work up to this. Break it up. Explore your best options. Take charge on how you want to do this.

Lastly we strongly encourage everybody to start slow and build up, remember you can always do some more tomorrow!