

Physical Activity and Exercise

Part of the Learning to Live Well with Diabetes Series

Welcome! A diabetes diagnosis can feel overwhelming. There is so much to learn and so much to do. The **Learning to Live Well with Diabetes** series was created to share clear, practical information and resources to offer support without adding extra stress. Setting small, manageable goals over time can help relieve stress and lead to lasting health improvements, and you don't have to do it alone. Please take what is helpful to you on your journey and leave the rest.

If you need help accessing or understanding this information, contact:

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Physical Activity and Diabetes

Living with diabetes means balancing many parts of daily life, and physical activity can be a powerful tool to support that balance. Moving your body helps your muscles use glucose for energy, supports heart health, can improve mood and sleep and may make it easier to manage blood glucose (or blood sugar) over time. At the same time, fitting activity into busy schedules, changing routines and everyday responsibilities can be challenging. The good news is that physical activity doesn't have to be perfect or complicated to make a difference. This resource will explore why movement matters for diabetes management and offer practical ideas and goal-setting tools to help you find ways of being active that fit your life.



Physical Activity vs. Exercise

Physical activity and exercise are related, but not the same. **Physical activity** includes any movement that uses energy—like walking the dog, gardening, or taking the stairs. **Exercise** is a type of physical activity that is planned and structured to improve fitness, such as running, lifting weights, or taking a class. These terms are often used interchangeably, but they have different meanings. **All movement that feels comfortable and doesn't cause pain can be beneficial**, and different types of movement can support different goals. This resource focuses on physical activity, with the understanding that activity can become exercise with intention and planning. When something applies specifically to exercise, that term is used.



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How Does Activity and Exercise Support Diabetes Management?

Here are some important ways physical activity and/or exercise can support diabetes management and why each benefit matters:



Improves blood glucose control

During physical activity, muscles use glucose for energy. This helps lower blood glucose levels during and after activity.



Increases insulin sensitivity

Regular exercise helps the body use insulin more effectively, which can make it easier for glucose to move from the bloodstream into cells.



Supports heart health

People with diabetes have a higher risk of heart disease. Regular exercise can help improve circulation, lower blood pressure and support healthy cholesterol levels.



Helps manage stress

Physical activity can reduce stress hormones and promote the release of chemicals that support mood and relaxation. Lower stress can also help support more stable blood glucose levels.



Improves sleep

Regular physical activity can help people fall asleep more easily and sleep more soundly. Better sleep can support overall health and blood glucose management.



Builds and maintains muscle strength

Stronger muscles can use glucose more efficiently, which can help support blood glucose control.



Supports energy and daily functioning

Regular movement can improve stamina and make everyday activities—like walking, carrying groceries or climbing stairs—feel easier.



Helps reduce the risk of diabetes-related complications

By supporting blood glucose control, heart health and circulation, regular exercise can help lower the risk of complications over time.

Did You Know?

Some research suggests regular exercise may help support the function of pancreatic beta cells, which produce insulin, particularly in early type 2 diabetes.

How Much Activity is Enough?

- Any physical activity that feels comfortable and doesn't cause pain can benefit people with diabetes by helping the body use glucose more effectively.
- Even small amounts of movement—short walks, gentle stretching or active household chores—can make a meaningful difference.
- The American Diabetes Association and other experts recommend about 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity per week (examples: brisk walking, cycling, swimming).
- Those 150 minutes can be split into smaller sessions, for example about 30 minutes on most days or multiple short bouts of 10–15 minutes.
- Include strength or resistance activities 2–3 days per week to build muscle and further improve glucose use and metabolic health.
- If 150 minutes or the strength sessions feel like too much right now, start where you are—some activity is always better than none.

Experts recommend about 150 minutes of **moderate-intensity** activity per week

Physical activity and exercise can be grouped into a few main types, each supporting health—and diabetes management

Activity type	What is it?	How does it help?	Examples
Aerobic (cardio) Most days	Continuous movement that raises heart rate (uses oxygen for energy)	Supports heart health and blood glucose management	Walking, wheeling, cycling, swimming, aerobics classes, dancing, seated cardio routines
Strength 2-3 days per week	Short bursts of effort to build muscle (can be anaerobic—uses energy without oxygen)	Improves how the body uses glucose	Lifting weights, bodyweight exercises (squats, wall push-ups, etc.), Seated strength exercises
Flexibility Regularly	Stretching and gentle movement	Improves range of motion and comfort	Gentle stretching, yoga or chair yoga, tai chi
Balance As needed	Activities that improve stability	Helps prevent falls and supports coordination	Standing on one foot, heel to toe walking



The Talk Test

One simple way to tell if an activity is moderate intensity is the **talk test**. During **moderate** activity, your breathing and heart rate increase, but you should still be able to **talk in short sentences**. You may notice that speaking requires a little more effort, but you don't have to stop to catch your breath. If you can easily sing or carry on a long conversation, the activity is probably **light**. If you can only say a few words before needing to breathe, the activity is likely **vigorous**.

A Simple Habit that Helps Right Away!

A recent research study found that **taking a short walk right after eating can lower blood sugar right away**.

In the study, people who walked for just 10 minutes after drinking a sugary drink had:

- Lower blood sugar spikes
- Lower average blood sugar over the next 2 hours

Why it works:

After you eat, your body has more sugar in your bloodstream. Walking helps your muscles use that sugar for energy, so less of it stays in your blood.

Try it:

- Walk for **10–15 minutes after a meal**
- Even a **slow or moderate pace** helps
- Start with **one meal a day** and build from there

Small steps—literally—can make a real difference.



Preparing to Increase Physical Activity

Getting started with more physical activity or adding exercise can be complicated, and that's completely understandable—health conditions, pain, breathing or heart problems, busy schedules, caregiving responsibilities, lack of safe places to walk or limited access to gyms or equipment all make it harder for some people than others. You're not to blame for these barriers and feeling frustrated or unsure doesn't mean you've failed. Small, realistic steps that fit your life and health—even brief, gentle movement—still matter, and asking for support from your care team or community can help you find safe, doable options that work for you. **If you are new to exercising or experiencing physical barriers to movement, here are some things that may help:**



Check with your healthcare team first:

Tell your primary care provider, cardiologist, pulmonologist or rheumatologist about your pain or breathing problems before starting or changing activity so they can assess risks and give tailored advice.



Ask for clear limits and guidance:

Request specific safe heart-rate targets, activity types to avoid, red flags to stop, and whether testing (stress test, pulmonary function, joint imaging) or medication adjustments are needed.



Start gently and progress slowly:

Begin with low-intensity, short-duration sessions (e.g., 5–10 minutes) and increase time or intensity by no more than about 10% per week as tolerated.



Choose low-impact activities:

Walking or rolling on flat surfaces, stationary cycling, water-based exercise/aquatics, chair-based exercises, gentle yoga or tai chi and seated marching reduce joint and respiratory stress.



Track progress and adjust:

Keep a simple activity and symptom log to share with your clinician or therapist so your plan can be safely advanced or modified.

Building Habits and Setting Goals

Building a new habit takes time, repetition, and a bit of patience. Research suggests it can take anywhere from **about 3 to 10 weeks** for a behavior to start feeling more automatic, though it can take longer depending on the person and the habit. Missing a day doesn't undo your progress—what matters most is getting back to it and keeping the routine going over time. Don't forget to celebrate your effort. **Here are some simple, practical tips to help turn an action into a habit:**



Start small

Choose something realistic and easy to repeat, like a 5–10 minute walk. Small wins build consistency.



Be consistent

Try to do the activity at the same time or in the same situation each day to help it become routine.



Pair it with an existing habit

Link the new behavior to something you already do (for example, stretch after brushing your teeth or walk after a meal).



Plan ahead

Decide when, where, and how you'll do the activity so it's easier to follow through.



Make it convenient

Keep barriers low—have comfortable shoes ready or choose activities that fit easily into your day.



Track your progress

Use a calendar, checklist or app to see your consistency over time.

Are you ready to get started? The *Learning to Live Well with Diabetes* series Goal Setting Tool can help you get started! (If you're not feeling quite ready, it can help with that, too.)