

How to stay healthy and active when living with Huntington's disease: A guide for patients and families

The importance of exercise

Exercise is a powerful medicine! There is much evidence in the general public of the many benefits from exercise for our health and wellbeing. There is also some evidence on the benefits of exercise for people with Huntington's disease, especially in the early and middle stages of the disease. It is very important to start exercising as early as possible in HD, when the changes to physical abilities, thinking and emotions are smaller, making it easier to begin a physically active routine. Exercise and physical activity can be neuroprotective – meaning they can help protect the brain and maintain a healthy brain environment to maintain or improve thinking, physical function and mental health.

Exercise can improve physical, emotional and mental wellbeing in HD

- Improves fitness, strength, and the ability to move.
- Helps maintain independence, improve walking and balance, and prevent falls.
- Promotes better sleep.
- Helps create more positive mood and greater sense of well-being and helps manage low mood and anxious thoughts.

Becoming more active

Starting a new exercise program can be challenging. People with HD may struggle to feel motivated because of changes in the brain. They may also feel quite low, unhappy or frustrated, which can affect taking part in new activities.

Consider consulting a physiotherapist and/or occupational therapist to help you to design an exercise program that is both safe and achievable for you. A physiotherapist familiar with HD can offer education and adapt the program to fit your specific needs and functional abilities. Regular reassessment of the exercise program by the physiotherapist is important, especially as the symptoms of HD change and progress. If you are unable to find a therapist who is familiar with HD, look for someone who specializes in neurological physiotherapy or who has expertise in other neurodegenerative diseases such as Parkinson's disease.

To help stay active and exercise regularly, someone affected by HD should experiment and choose exercises that are enjoyable. Some people find it useful to combine exercises into their daily routine (e.g., walking the dog, gardening, climbing stairs), and involve friends and family for support. Others prefer a structured exercise program at a gym or in the home, or organized classes (e.g., walking groups, or yoga, tai chi and dancing classes).

Frequency and Duration of Workouts

Adults should be active daily. These are the recommended weekly exercise guidelines:

	Aerobic physical activity	Muscle and bone strengthening physical activity
Frequency	150 minutes per week	3 times per week
Intensity	Moderate* to vigorous** intensity 55-90% heart rate maximum (maximum heart rate=220-your age)	Upper and lower body exercise Progressive resistance training as tolerated
Examples	Brisk walking, running, cycling, swimming	Muscle strengthening: Climbing stairs, digging in the garden, lifting weights, doing push-ups. Bone strengthening: Yoga, walking, running

* Moderate-intensity aerobic activity makes one breathe harder and the heart beats faster. A person doing moderate-intensity exercise should be able to talk, but not sing.

** Vigorous-intensity aerobic activity makes the heart rate increase quite a bit. It becomes difficult to say more than a few words without needing to catch one's breath.

Steps to take:

Select the type of exercise or physical activity you prefer (gym, sport, dancing, something else?).

Develop specific and achievable goals around how much activity you would like to do and how often (e.g., "My goal is to walk the dog for 15 minutes 5 times a week").

Log your progress using an app, fitness tracker or diary.

A companion or an accountability partner can help achieve and maintain your goals.

Start slowly and reward yourself for starting and working on your plan.

Remember, be kind to yourself. It is ok to have setbacks – you can always adjust your goals and start again.

Resources

- Physical Activity Tool to help you set goals <https://ehdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/PAT-HD-v2-August-2019.pdf>
- ACTIVE-HD videos of home resistance training exercises: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCH7_ed2_mkzXNWPZqVlosw
- Videos of exercise for HD <http://eurohuntington.org/active-huntingtons/>
- Movement to music exercises <https://u.osu.edu/mend/move-to-improve/>
- HD Workout tips: <https://hdsa.org/find-help/living-well-with-hd/exercise-physical-therapy/>
- Exercise and HD Fact sheet [Exercise-and-HD-Factsheet-Oct-2020.pdf](https://www.huntingtonsociety.ca/files/Exercise-and-HD-Factsheet-Oct-2020.pdf) ([huntingtonsociety.ca](https://www.huntingtonsociety.ca))
- Physical activity workbook to use: <https://ehdn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/ENGAGE-HD-Physical-Activity-Workbook-v2-UK.pdf>