

Health & Fitness Tips

Exercise Risks - Balance the Risks

Any dedicated person participating in exercise will probably agree that the feeling you get after a great workout is worth the inherent risks of getting injured. The trouble is, if we do get hurt, it can derail our entire fitness regime, making us more frustrated and prone to working out with an injury just to maintain our fitness. This causes more damage in the long haul.

The good news is that we can minimise the risks. Don't think that sports injuries are only for elite athletes. According to Greg Gibson, a physiotherapist with Sports Medicine Australia, "they're much more common in amateurs". The good news is that he believes everyone can minimise the risks, whatever their workout.

Swimming: moderate risk

Swimming is a great way to start a fitness program, but even this has some inherent risks. Not surprisingly, our arms and shoulders are most affected by this workout. Research suggests the problems are often technique related, with experienced and regular swimmers less likely to sustain damage.

Lack of flexibility is a key factor in poor technique, so warming up the muscles and joints we're going to use for the workout is essential. With our arms in an incorrect stroke position, we're subjecting our joints to high resistance through the water at an unnatural angle.

Another danger with swimming is poor fluid intake. It's easy to forget to jump out of the pool and have a drink, which leaves our bodies dehydrated, fatigued and at great risk of injury. If your body is telling you that it's tired or sore, you should listen to it and act accordingly.

Weight-training: moderate to high risk

Before beginning any weights program, it's important to know exactly which muscles we want to work, what results we want to achieve and how to use the equipment. At the beginning of your exercise program it should be comfortable, not hard. The main problems in weight-training arise from people lifting incorrectly or lifting more than they should. Some basic weight-training tips are:

- use a spotter or trainer,
- build up slowly,
- keep your back straight when lifting,
- breathe out on exertion, don't hold your breath,
- don't work a muscle group more than three times in a week, and
- stop if you feel pain.

Listen to your body. "No pain, no gain" is only for elite athletes. Elite athletes train for years before really pushing their limits. If you are not an elite athlete, no pain no gain is ridiculous.

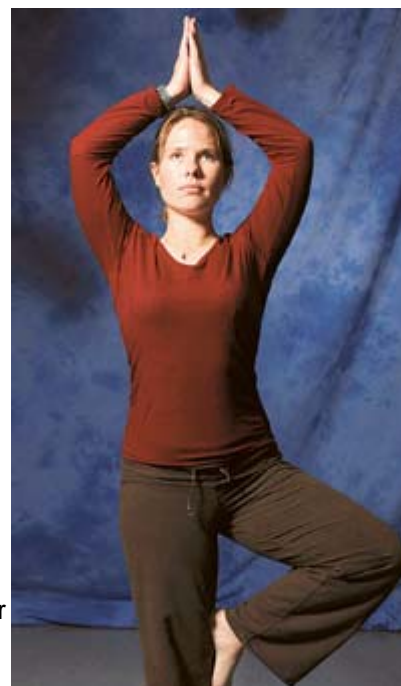
Cardio: moderate to high risk

Cardio workouts - including aerobics, step, tae-bo and forms of dance - combine high- and low-impact movements. Although injuries are not usually serious, they are quite common. The most prevalent injuries from cardio are falls, ankle and knee twists and overuse injuries, such as painful shin splints. Cardio exercises can also aggravate past injuries.

Before you begin an activity make sure you have what is needed to perform that activity safely. Prerequisites for cardio workouts are a certain degree of existing fitness, appropriate footwear and a qualified, registered instructor outside the ADF or a PTI within the ADF.

Always begin a cardio workout with a warm up and some gentle stretches, ensuring you have enough space and no obstacles nearby. If the instructor/PTI introduces a new movement, don't be afraid to ask for feedback on your performance. Many injuries are simply the result of poor technique.

Finally, if you feel pain be sure to seek advice. Too often we accept shin splints as a mild discomfort but they can worsen to a stress fracture if ignored.



Netball: high risk

Netball may involve a high injury risk but don't let that discourage you from the most popular team sport in Australia. Ankle and knee injuries are most common as it's such a fast sport, requiring lots of twisting and stop/start motions.

Sprains and strains will usually heal after a few days, but twisting a knee can tear the anterior cruciate - that is up to a year of pain and rehab. The nature of team sports also means a high risk of finger and contact injuries and falls.

We might not be able to control what the other players do on the court or how they throw the ball, but we can take steps for our own safety. Netball is a social sport and people will often play without really preparing.

A good warm up that increases in intensity and includes the running, twisting and stepping that the game requires, along with checking your technique, will be of benefit. You also need to look at the kneecap. Does it bend in line with the foot, or is it twisting off balance? Are movements controlled, or are they jerking?

Yoga: low risk

For a healthy body and soul, you can't go past the ancient art of yoga. This gentle workout is suitable for almost everyone.

The chance of injury is a lot less, though trying to twist into some of those positions can leave you feeling as though you have just been put through a wringer. Even though yoga is known to soothe back pain, it can also cause back pain because of muscle strain.

A good tip is to warm up with gentle postures first, and stretch the back in all directions - forwards, backwards, twisting and bending to the side.

This is especially important in vigorous forms of yoga such as bikram and ashtanga. Always keep the neck in alignment with the rest of the spine and avoid locking the knees in the standing postures. Since technique is so important, it's best to take at least an introductory class with a qualified instructor before trying yoga at home.

Warm up program:

- jog for two minutes to raise a light sweat,
- stretch for 15-20 minutes,
- gently stretch the muscles you will use,
- hold each stretch for 20 seconds,
- don't bounce,
- repeat each stretch two to three times, and
- increase intensity gradually to the intended activity level.

Pilates: low risk

Apart from its popularity as a strength building workout, pilates is also used, and was developed for, rehabilitation. For anyone who has suffered an injury, this makes pilates one of the best ways to recommence your fitness program.

Professional athletes and dancers also use it to build core strength and gain an edge over their competition.

If you haven't exercised in a long time it would be worth getting advice from somebody who is qualified, although pilates is a pretty safe workout. The main risks involve injuries from poorly maintained equipment. If using a reformer, check all springs for kinks or gaps that may indicate weakness and ensure nuts, bolts and clips are securely fastened.

As with yoga, technique is paramount. A home DVD is great if your knowledge is already sound, but it won't correct you if you do something wrong. Training with an instructor ensures movements are accurate and can help get the most out of the workout.