

# Exercise and Pulmonary Fibrosis



Centre of Research Excellence in  
Pulmonary Fibrosis



Lung  
Foundation  
Australia

Regular exercise is important for everyone, including people living with Pulmonary Fibrosis (PF). Although the idea of exercising might seem difficult, involving a regular exercise routine into your everyday life can help improve your quality of life, and reduce your breathlessness on exertion.

Getting started with exercise can be challenging when you are feeling breathless. Taking part in a pulmonary rehabilitation program under the guidance of healthcare professionals can be a great way to begin.

## What is pulmonary rehabilitation?

Pulmonary rehabilitation is a six-to-eight-week supervised program of exercise and education that is specifically designed for people living with a lung condition, including PF. It can help improve both your physical health, as well as your mental health. Your pulmonary rehabilitation team will tailor every step of your program to suit you, so that you know you are doing the best possible exercises for your body and your health.

### WHAT DOES IT INVOLVE?

- **Exercise training:** Pulmonary rehabilitation usually includes one to two supervised exercise sessions per week and can involve a combination of endurance training such as walking or cycling on a stationary bike, as well as strength training such as lower-body exercises with weights or using your own body weight. Balance retraining and flexibility, such as stretching, may also be added to your program.
- **Education:** Some programs offer information sessions to help you manage your condition and get the most out of your treatment. These sessions might include information on medicines and managing breathlessness, low mood or feelings of sadness or anxiety.
- **Behavioural change:** This might include support and information to help maintain a healthy and active lifestyle or help to quit smoking.

## What are the benefits of pulmonary rehabilitation?

In short, pulmonary rehabilitation can help you feel better! People with PF may experience a range of benefits including:



Improved overall quality of life



Decreased breathlessness



Reduced fatigue



Increased muscle strength and mass through strength training



Improved everyday functioning including exercise capacity, activity levels and ability to do daily tasks



Learning self-management skills



Connecting with others with a lived experience of lung disease, such as PF.

## How can you get started?

Your pulmonary rehabilitation team will do a thorough assessment to find out which exercises suit you best before designing a program for you. In addition to a supervised program, they will give you your own comprehensive program to follow at home. Generally, your home program will encourage you to exercise for at least 20 to 30 minutes most days of the week. This can also be continued once you have completed the program to help maintain your fitness.

Depending on your needs, your pulmonary rehabilitation team may recommend interval training for you (e.g., bouts of exercise with breaks in between to allow recovery time) rather than a continuous session of exercise.

Talk to your doctor about the possibility of getting a referral to a pulmonary rehabilitation program. You can also access a list of pulmonary rehabilitation programs on the Lung Foundation Australia [website](#).

If you don't have access to a pulmonary rehabilitation program in your area, you can talk to your GP about a referral to a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist to help design a program for you to follow at home.

## Tips for exercising

### 1. Find a type of exercise that suits your preference and lifestyle including:



Aerobic exercise that uses your whole body has the most benefit – e.g., walking, riding an exercise bike, or even swimming.



Strength exercises are recommended in addition to this.

Walking is a great form of exercise because it is an aerobic exercise, i.e. it uses the whole body. It is also a functional exercise and useful for your everyday life. Although initially you may find walking any distance challenging, you will improve over time with practice. Build up slowly. Some people might start with walking around the house or in shopping centres where they know there is regular seating, others may feel more comfortable to walk around the block. Find your starting point and increase the distance and speed at which you walk in small increments.

### 2. Use your level of breathlessness to manage your exercise intensity



Everyone can expect to feel breathless when they exercise. Being breathless with exercise does not harm your lungs and is a normal part of exercising. Your healthcare team will provide you with guidance and support you through the experience.

- If you have attended pulmonary rehabilitation, you will be familiar with the 1 to 10 breathlessness scale. The correct exercise intensity is usually at a 3 to 4 out of 10 (moderate to somewhat severely breathless) on the scale. This may vary depending on your oxygen saturation levels. If you feel relatively comfortable and able to talk, then your exercise intensity is correct.



If you feel severely breathless and cannot talk, you should stop exercising, recover your breath and start again at a lower intensity when you are able.

### 3. Managing your symptoms, including breathlessness and fatigue, while exercising is important



If you become too breathless while participating in an activity, take a break. Try a recovery position such as sitting in a chair, resting your elbows on your knees, or leaning up against something to catch your breath.



Start slowly and build up your level of exercise in terms of duration and the number of days you exercise each week, so that you are not too tired or fatigued afterwards.



Pace yourself while you are exercising. Try and breathe at a rate that matches your exercise intensity. If it is too hard, stop exercising, recover and start again at a slower pace.

## Exercising safely

Looking after yourself is the most important consideration when exercising.

- **Speak with your healthcare team:** Before exercising it is important to speak with your doctor or exercise professional to be cleared to exercise. Your healthcare team will assess your current condition and discuss an exercise plan that is right for you.
- **Managing lower oxygen levels:** If you normally use supplementary oxygen therapy in your everyday life, then you should continue to use it during your exercise program. If you are unsure if you need oxygen therapy while exercising, make sure you speak with your treating healthcare team. They may assess your need for oxygen therapy while exercising or they may adjust your exercise program.
- **Usual safety precautions:** Like everyone, whether they have PF or not, if you experience any chest pain, light headedness or any other unusual symptoms while exercising, you should stop your exercise and speak with your healthcare team immediately.

## Maintaining your fitness

Once you have started to achieve the benefits of exercise, it is important to continue exercising to help maintain your physical fitness and lung health. Options include:

- Keep going with your home exercise program – e.g., a daily walking and strength routine.
- Attend a regular exercise class – ask your pulmonary rehabilitation team for suggestions.
- Attend a Lungs in Action program – a community-based exercise class designed to help people with a chronic lung disease maintain the benefits achieved through pulmonary rehabilitation. Find out more via Lung Foundation Australia's [website](#).

## LUNG FOUNDATION AUSTRALIA SERVICES



Information and Support Team



Lung disease information resources



Education webinars



Support groups



Peer-to-peer connections



Referral to pulmonary rehabilitation and Lungs in Action exercise programs



E-newsletter

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