

# Physical activity and men's health

Medical research is showing links between cardiovascular health and male reproductive health – a good reason for men to increase their physical activity.



## Why is physical activity an important public health measure?

Being physically active and limiting sedentary behaviour (sitting or lying down) is important for good health. A lack of physical activity is linked to increased risk of serious chronic diseases, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes. In fact, people who are not active are almost twice as likely to die from a heart attack compared to those who are active. After cigarette smoking, physical inactivity is the most important factor you can change to lower your risk of chronic disease, including some cancers.

However, less than half of the Australian population are doing enough physical activity for good health. Increasing activity levels in the community is therefore a public health priority.

## Can increased physical activity prevent disease in men?

Men suffer from high rates of cardiovascular disease; coronary heart disease is the leading cause of death in Australian men. Preventing cardiovascular disease and diabetes, and addressing common risk factors (smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, being overweight) is therefore particularly important for men. Research shows more physical activity throughout life:

- reduces the likelihood of early death caused by cardiovascular disease
- reduces the number of new cases of cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes
- lowers body weight, blood pressure and cholesterol levels
- reduces the risk of, and helps to recover from, some cancers.

## Is physical activity linked to male reproductive health?

Medical research is showing links between cardiovascular health and male reproductive health, which is another good reason for men to try to increase their activity levels.

## How is physical activity linked to erectile dysfunction?

Links between erectile dysfunction (ED) and cardiovascular disease are being shown in many research studies. In fact, ED can be an early warning sign for future cardiovascular disease. A man with ED has a similar risk of having a heart attack to a man with a family history of heart disease or a cigarette smoker, especially if the man is younger.

Erectile dysfunction and cardiovascular disease have some of the same causes and risk factors, including being physically inactive. Many studies have shown that men with higher levels of physical activity have lower rates of erectile dysfunction. Engaging in moderate levels of physical activity (for

example, 30 minutes of exercise each day) may help to prevent both erectile dysfunction and cardiovascular disease.

## How is physical activity linked to prostate cancer?

Research has not shown a link between low levels of physical activity and prostate cancer in general, but some studies have shown that very high levels of physical activity may protect against aggressive forms of prostate cancer (cancers that spread quickly). More research needs to be done to better understand these possible links.

Many studies are showing that including physical activity during or after treatment for prostate cancer can help improve quality of life. Men treated with androgen deprivation therapy have a higher chance of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and osteoporosis; physical activity can help to lower the chance of these conditions. Physical activity may also reduce side-effects of treatment as well as depression and anxiety in prostate cancer survivors.

More research studies are showing the importance of including physical activity as part of a healthy lifestyle following a prostate cancer diagnosis. However, we still need to understand more about how to help men to become more active at a time when the diagnosis and treatments might make it seem more difficult.

## Is physical activity linked to other prostate disease?

Some studies have shown a link between increasing levels of physical activity and lower rates of benign prostate enlargement (BPH, benign prostatic hyperplasia) or bothersome urinary symptoms (LUTS, lower urinary tract symptoms). Physical activity might help in preventing these prostate problems but this has not been proven.

The good news is that doing any physical activity is better than doing none

## Is physical activity linked to testosterone levels or male infertility?

The rising proportion of the community who are overweight, linked closely to less physical activity, is particularly important for male reproductive health. Obese men are more likely to have low testosterone levels and erectile dysfunction (ED), and on average are less fertile than normal weight men.

Obesity also increases the chance of developing type 2 diabetes (sometimes called adult-onset diabetes), a condition where blood glucose levels are higher than normal. Men with type 2 diabetes are about twice as likely to have ED as men without diabetes and they have a higher chance of having low testosterone levels. Testosterone is needed for muscle strength and healthy bones, and is important for male sexual and reproductive health.

Men with diabetes who are not able to keep their blood glucose levels well controlled, and men who have both

diabetes and obesity, have the highest chance of male reproductive problems compared to men without these problems. For an obese or overweight man, with or without diabetes, losing weight may help reproductive health. However, not putting on weight in the first place is the best way to lower the chance of reproductive health problems. Along with changes to the diet, physical activity is very important in either keeping a healthy weight or losing weight.

## Can increasing your physical activity improve reproductive health problems?

While the links between physical activity and male reproductive health problems are clear, there is little research showing that physical activity actually prevents or reduces these problems. An Italian study showed that an exercise program improved sexual function in some overweight men with erectile problems. This study is the beginning of the research needed to show clearly that physical activity should be included with other treatments for erectile dysfunction. This would also be good for cardiovascular and general health.

## Do treatments for reproductive health problems work better when combined with physical activity?

The possible benefit of increased physical activity, when taking drugs or other treatments for male reproductive conditions, is not clear. However, it seems that for men with cardiovascular disease or diabetes, increasing physical activity may not only better control these health problems, but also improve the effect of any drug treatment for erectile dysfunction. While further research is still needed, including physical activity into prevention and treatment programs for men with reproductive health problems is a good idea.

## Can physical activity help men with depression or anxiety and reproductive health problems?

Living with a reproductive health problem can affect men psychologically as well as physically. There can be effects on relationships, quality of life and social interactions. There are many ways for men to get help with psychological problems, including speaking to professionals or to other men in a similar situation. Physical activity gives an added benefit for helping depression and anxiety, and for improving general quality of life, making it even more important for men with reproductive health conditions to become more active.

## How can I include physical activity in my life?

The good news is that doing any physical activity is better than doing none. So get moving today, and improve your reproductive and general health.

Be active every day in as many ways as you can. Ways to increase your daily physical activity:

- try to do at least 30 minutes of activity on at least 5 days per week
- walk or cycle instead of using the car
- take the stairs rather than the lift
- play with children in an active way
- invite friends, family and work colleagues to be active with you.

## For more information:

See 'Australia's physical activity and sedentary behaviour guidelines for adults (2014)' developed by the Australian Government Department of Health ([www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au)).

Contact your local council to find out about physical activity programs in your area.

## Expert reviewer

A/Professor Carolyn Allan  
MBBS (Hons) PhD DRCOG (UK) FRACP  
Andrology Australia  
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553 St Kilda Road, Melbourne  
Victoria 3004, Australia