

CONGENITAL HEART DISEASE AND EXERCISE

PUBLIC

WHAT IS CONGENITAL HEART DISEASE?

Congenital heart disease (CHD) is a general term for a range of conditions that are present at birth and affect the normal workings of the heart. These can result in minor heart problems or major defects.

Congenital heart defects are the most common types of birth defects, affecting 1 in 100 babies. In Australia, 8 babies are born each day with some form of congenital heart defect. Some defects are mild and cause no significant disturbance to the way the heart functions. However, more than half of all children with a heart condition will require treatment at some stage of life.

HOW IS CONGENITAL HEART DISEASE TREATED?

The treatment for each type of heart condition is different. Some conditions may simply be monitored whereas more serious issues might require open heart surgery or long-term medications. It is important to recognise that CHD is rarely completely fixed and that most people require intermittent check-ups with a cardiologist, even though they might feel completely well and can live normal lives.

HOW WILL EXERCISE BENEFIT ME?

Exercise has many important benefits for people with CHD such as:

- Increasing cardiorespiratory fitness, muscle strength and endurance
- Improving mental health and quality of life
- Reducing symptoms of breathlessness and fatigue
- Helping to maintain a healthy weight, improve self-confidence and body image

Exercise also helps to reduce the risk of acquired cardiovascular problems like high blood pressure, stroke and heart attack.



WHAT DO I NEED TO CONSIDER BEFORE STARTING EXERCISE?

Almost everyone with congenital heart disease can benefit from exercise but it is important to do it in a way that is safe and beneficial.

Some people with CHD may have almost normal heart structure and function, and others have complex abnormalities affecting the heart and its function. It is important to speak with your cardiologist about what kind of exercise and levels of intensity are best suited for your situation. This is because some types of heart problems may be more likely to develop unusual heart rhythms or blood pressure during physical activity.

If you have been sick due to your condition, work with your doctor to achieve full health before commencing an exercise program. However, your cardiologist may actually recommend exercise if you have recently deteriorated or had a procedure and refer you to an appropriately qualified exercise professional (Accredited Exercise Physiologist or Physiotherapist) to help build fitness again in a supervised environment. Occasionally, due to a severe or complex problem, your cardiologist might suggest you only perform light levels of exercise.

Depending on the type of congenital heart condition you have, it may be necessary for your doctor to perform some tests before an exercise program is commenced to help determine how much exercise is right for you. This also helps to monitor changes (and improvements!) in your fitness in the long term.

It is important that if you notice a change in symptoms during exercise, such as:

- palpitations associated with feeling unwell
- chest discomfort or pain
- dizziness
- or feeling generally unwell

that you should cease the exercise session, inform the person supervising the exercise (if it's a supervised session) and let your doctor know as soon as possible.

Fainting or becoming unconscious during exercise can be a sign of a serious problem and requires prompt cardiology review. Exercise should be discontinued until cardiology clearance is given.



HOW MUCH EXERCISE CAN I DO?

Exercise programs ideally should include:

- aerobic exercise – this helps to build heart and lung fitness; and
- resistance training exercises – these help build muscle strength, bulk and endurance

The intensity of exercises and length of training sessions will depend on your specific situation, but in general, here are some suggestions:

- Exercising on most days of the week for 20 to 60 minutes is a good goal.
- **Starting slowly, even with just a few minutes, can help improve fitness.**
- Choose activities you enjoy, this will help you stick with your exercise plan.
- Did you know that simple activities such as taking the stairs or walking even a little further than usual can help improve your overall health?

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Exercise is Medicine Australia www.exerciseismedicine.org.au
Exercise Right www.exerciseright.com.au

Find an Accredited Exercise Physiologist www.essa.org.au
Find a Physiotherapist www.choose.physio
HeartKids www.heartkids.org.au
Find a Sport and Exercise Physician www.acsep.org.au/

RELATED INFORMATION AND REFERENCES

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