

Return to Exercise After COVID-19

Regular exercise has been shown to improve heart health, mental health, immune defenses, sleep, and many other body systems but exercise during an active infection with COVID-19 may worsen inflammation and its impact on muscle function. For this reason, it is important to follow a plan to safely return to normal activity levels.

Here are general guidelines for recreational adult athletes and exercisers. If you are a competitive athlete or have additional questions, consult your medical provider. Use the table below to see the recommendations by the level of severity of COVID symptoms.

First consult the following list to identify the severity of your COVID-19 symptoms, then find the corresponding column in the table below to see the recommendations you should follow.

- **No Symptoms:** You tested positive for COVID-19 but did not have any symptoms.
- **Mild Illness:** During your COVID-19 illness you had one or more of the following symptoms: fever, cough, sore throat, malaise, headache, and muscle pain. You did not have shortness of breath or abnormal chest imaging.
- **Moderate Illness:** During your COVID-19 illness you had one or more of the following: shortness of breath, abnormal chest imaging, and/or oxygen saturation level of 94% or less. **This category also includes:**
 - People over 65 years of age
 - People of any age with significant cardiovascular risk factors such as diabetes, high blood pressure (hypertension), coronary artery disease, atrial fibrillation, or kidney disease.

- **Severe Illness or hospitalized:** If were admitted to the hospital, or if you had severe respiratory (lung) illness with or without respiratory failure, septic shock, and/or multiple organ dysfunction.

Severity of COVID-19 Symptoms	No symptoms	Mild symptoms	Moderate symptoms	Severe symptoms or hospitalized
When can I return to exercise?	No exercise for 10 days from the positive test result.	No exercise for until 10 days have passed since symptoms started and symptoms have fully resolved.	No exercise for at least 10 days since symptoms started and at least 10 days have passed without symptoms.	See your medical provider or cardiologist prior to returning to exercise
Do I need cardiovascular Testing before returning to exercise?	Not needed	Not needed	You need a medical evaluation to see if you need cardiovascular testing	
Return to Exercise Guidance:	Paced and gradual return to activity.	Paced and gradual return to activity.	You need clearance from a medical provider before returning to activity	
Stop activity and see your medical provider if you develop new symptoms such as dizziness, chest pain, shortness of breath, or palpitations while returning to exercise.				

How should I start exercising again?

After you completed your rest and recovery period, it is important to return to exercise in a graduated, step-by-step manner. Start with step 1. Progress to the next step only if you can complete the previous step for a minimum of 1-2 days. If you develop symptoms at any stage, stop and contact your doctor.

- **Step 1:** Start slow
 - Examples: walking, activities of daily living like laundry, washing dishes.
- **Step 2:** Light activity
 - Examples: walking, jogging, stationary bike (no more than 70% of your maximum heart rate). You should easily be able to speak in complete sentences during exercise at this level.
 - 15 minutes or less
- **Step 3:** Moderate activity, may include running drills
 - Increase time to 15-30 minutes (no more than 80% maximum heart rate)
- **Step 4:** More complex training activities
 - Examples: shooting baskets, light weights, yoga, running drills.
 - Increase time to 30-45 minutes
- **Step 5:** Increase the intensity of exercise
 - Examples: weight lifting, running, half-court basketball, ice skating, swimming
 - Increase time up to 60 minutes
- **Step 6:** Resume normal workouts

When should I call my health care provider?

Call your provider if you have any of the following symptoms at any time:

- Shortness of breath.
- Chest pain.
- Palpitations or feeling like your heart is beating too fast.
- Excessive fatigue with exertion.
- Call 911 if symptoms are worsening or severe.

References:

1. CDC. *Symptom-Based Strategy for Discontinuing Transmission-Based precautions*. Access at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/disposition-hospitalized-patients.html#definitions>
2. Kim JH, Levine BD, Phelan D, et al. *Coronavirus Disease 2019 and the Athletic Heart: Emerging Perspectives on Pathology, Risks, and Return to Play*. *JAMA Cardiol*. 2021;6(2):219-227.
3. Elliott N, Martin R, Heron N, et al. Infographic. *Graduated return to play guidance following COVID-19 infection*. *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 2020;54:1174-1175.

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