

# Keeping active

Physical activity when you are  
living with a terminal illness

## Introduction

There are lots of benefits to keeping active if you're living with a terminal illness. It can help reduce some effects of the illness or treatments, such as pain, fatigue or shortness of breath. It can also help with stress and anxiety, and support your quality of life.

Doing some regular physical activity can help you to feel more confident and in control. If your illness is advanced or you can only do a little, gentle movement may still help relieve symptoms and support your wellbeing.

This booklet is an introduction to how keeping active can help with your physical and mental health if you're living with a terminal illness. Speak to your healthcare team about keeping active with their support. On page 14 we have useful organisations where you can find more information, including support in your local area.



If you need more information or extra support, you can call the free Marie Curie Support Line on **0800 090 2309\***, email **[support@mariecurie.org.uk](mailto:support@mariecurie.org.uk)** or see page 12.

\* Calls are free from landlines and mobiles. Your call may be recorded for training and monitoring purposes.

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## Why keeping active matters

We all need to keep active for our bodies to work well. This is true throughout our lives. It helps us feel better physically and mentally.

Exercise and activity can help you physically by:

- strengthening your body and giving you more energy
- improving your balance
- improving your circulation and blood pressure
- reducing symptoms like constipation, fatigue and breathlessness.

It can also support your mental health by:

- helping you to relax
- helping you sleep better
- improving your overall sense of wellbeing
- reducing anxiety, stress and depression
- improving your concentration and helping you to feel more alert.

Your illness or treatments may cause symptoms that make some everyday activities more difficult. By working on things like your balance and strength, physical activity can help you do your daily activities more easily.

## Staying safe with the support of your healthcare team

Before you take up any physical activity or exercise, it's important to speak to your healthcare team. Talk to a doctor, nurse, physiotherapist or occupational therapist about the right activity programme for you.

They can talk to you about the safety of different types of activities. Together you can then decide what you want to do. They can also talk to you about adapting what you do and how much you do to your ability and how much energy you have.

### Safety while you're being active

It's important to stay hydrated if you're doing physical activity. It can be a good idea to keep a bottle of water with you.

It's very important to always stop what you're doing if you feel dizzy, faint or sick. Rest and try again more gently when you feel able to. If the symptoms continue or you experience any new pain, stop and ask your doctor or nurse for advice.

### Healthcare professionals who can support you

Physiotherapists and occupational therapists can support you to do physical activity and exercise safely. Ask your doctor about being referred to a physiotherapist or occupational therapist.

### Physiotherapists

A physiotherapist can help with activities to improve your strength, balance and confidence. They can show you ways to exercise safely. If you need walking aids, they can get them for you and teach you how to use them.

### Occupational therapists

Occupational therapists can recommend different techniques to help you carry out day-to-day activities.

Fatigue and breathlessness are symptoms which might make it harder or stop you from wanting to do physical activity. Occupational therapists and physiotherapists can help you manage these symptoms.



Philip Hardman/Marie Curie

## Types of activity

It's best to try to find an activity or exercise you enjoy – rather than something you think you should do. If you look forward to doing it, then you're more likely to stick with it.

Some people like the social side of a group exercise class or activity. You might be someone who's more motivated by being in a group. But that's not for everyone, so try to find what works best for you.

You also do not need to spend money on a class or gym. Climbing stairs, gardening, housework and even playing with children are all ways to stay active. Just gentle movements can help to keep your muscles strong. They can also stop your arms or legs from feeling tight or stiff.

Other ideas for activities include:

- swimming or aqua aerobics
- chairbics (movement you can do while sitting in a chair or wheelchair)
- gentle yoga or chair yoga if you have limited mobility
- special exercise programmes at your hospice or health centre
- Tai chi or Qigong – gentle movements that can help to calm the mind and reduce the risk of falling by improving your balance.



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## The benefits of walking

If you can walk safely, then regular walks can be one of the simplest ways of supporting your physical and mental health. It can also be a good way to gradually build up your activity levels. If you can get outside into nature or a park or garden, it may help boost your mood and manage feelings of anxiety.

If you find walking difficult or are worried about falling or having an accident, speak to your healthcare team about walking safely. They can also help you use mobility aids.



You may also find our booklet, **Reducing your risk of falling**, useful. You can order or download it for free at [mariecurie.org.uk/publications](https://mariecurie.org.uk/publications) or by calling our free Support Line on **0800 090 2309\***.

## Activity if you use a wheelchair or have limited mobility

There are many ways to keep physically active if you're a wheelchair user, sometimes use a wheelchair or have limited mobility. Speak to your healthcare team about the best options for you. Some ideas include:

- swimming
- chairobics (movement you can do while sitting in a chair or wheelchair)
- a rowing or cycling machine adapted for wheelchair use.

The NHS website has more information on how wheelchair users can keep physically active. Visit [nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/wheelchair-users-fitness-advice/](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/wheelchair-users-fitness-advice/)

If you want to try swimming, these are some useful things to know:


- It's the law that people with a disability should have the same access to a swimming pool as a non-disabled person.
- Access routes to pools must be wheelchair-friendly and a wheelchair user must have access to get into the pool.
- Electric wheelchairs powered by wet batteries are not allowed near the pool, but the swimming pool must provide an alternative.

You can contact your local council or look online to find your nearest leisure centre or pool.

## More ideas for keeping active

The NHS website has simple exercises and activities you can try at home and can help you build your strength, balance and flexibility. They include exercises that you can do sitting down. Visit [nhs.uk/live-well/exercise](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise)

We Are Undefeatable is an organisation that helps people with long-term conditions find ways to do activity and movement. Their website has lots of ideas as well as resources – including Five in Five, a five-minute workout you can do at home. Visit [weareundefeatable.co.uk](https://www.weareundefeatable.co.uk)

 You may find our booklets useful, like **Managing fatigue** and **Managing breathlessness** which have practical tips and exercises you can do yourself. You can order or download these for free at [mariecurie.org.uk/publications](https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/publications) or by calling our free Support Line on **0800 090 2309\***.



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## How much physical activity do you need to do?

If you have not done any physical activity or exercise for a while your body will need time to adapt. Doing little and often at the beginning may help to reduce muscle pain and stiffness. So, it's best to start doing a small amount of activity and build up to more over time. You're also then less likely to stop because of sore muscles or feeling tired.

It's best to talk to your doctor, nurse, physiotherapist or occupational therapist about the right activity or exercise programme for you. They can help you build a programme based on:

- what you want to be able to do
- your condition
- any symptoms you have.



### How much physical activity do you need to do?

Your condition or treatments mean that you're going to have more energy some days than others. Try not to worry about this but accept that some days you can do more, some days you need to rest. Try and find a balance that's right for you. Remember that activity can be as simple as walking at a slow pace or moving around your home. Listen to your body and stop when you need to.

If you feel pain at any time, then you should stop. It's common to feel tired after physical activity. But if you feel exhausted or it impacts on other activities, consider reducing the amount you're doing. Speak to your healthcare professionals for advice on what would be best for you.

## How Marie Curie can help

Marie Curie is here for anyone with an illness they're likely to die from, and those close to them. Whatever the illness, wherever you are, we're with you to the end.

### Marie Curie Support Line

**0800 090 2309\***

Our free Support Line is for anyone with an illness they're likely to die from and those close to them. Our team, including nurses and specialist Energy Support Officers, offers practical and emotional support on everything from symptom management and day-to-day care to financial information and bereavement support. Our Support Line is available in over 200 languages, or via webchat at [mariecurie.org.uk/support](https://mariecurie.org.uk/support)

### Marie Curie Companions

Companion volunteers focus on what's important to you and those close to you. It might be accompanying you to appointments, being there to listen to how you're feeling without judgment, or stepping in so family or carers can take a break. Companions provide the emotional and practical support you want – at home, in hospital or over the phone.

[mariecurie.org.uk/companions](https://mariecurie.org.uk/companions)

### Marie Curie Telephone Bereavement Service

Get ongoing bereavement support over the phone from the same volunteer. You can access up to six sessions of 45 minutes. We can help if your bereavement was expected, happened recently or was some time ago.

[mariecurie.org.uk/bereavement](https://mariecurie.org.uk/bereavement)

## Marie Curie Online Community

Our Online Community is a space for you to share thoughts, feelings and experiences. It's moderated by the Marie Curie Support Line team, who can also help answer your questions.

[community.mariecurie.org.uk](https://community.mariecurie.org.uk)

## Marie Curie Hospice care where it's needed

### Our hospices

Our hospices help people with any illness they're likely to die from, and the people close to them, receive the support they need. From medical and physical support to psychological and emotional care, whatever your illness, at whatever stage of the journey, we help you to live the best life possible, right to the end.

[mariecurie.org.uk/hospices](https://mariecurie.org.uk/hospices)

### Hospice care at home

Our nurses, healthcare assistants and other healthcare professionals bring the clinical, practical and emotional help you need to you, in the comfort of your own home. And we offer support to the people close to you too – from reassurance and practical information to letting them take a break.

[mariecurie.org.uk/nurses](https://mariecurie.org.uk/nurses)

## Looking for more information?

If you found this booklet useful, we have free information available online at [mariecurie.org.uk/support](https://mariecurie.org.uk/support) or to order at [mariecurie.org.uk/publications](https://mariecurie.org.uk/publications)



## Useful organisations

### Age UK

**0800 678 1602**

[ageuk.org.uk](http://ageuk.org.uk)

A charity that aims to help older people make the most out of life. Their website includes health and fitness information. Along with a network of local branches, there are national divisions for the charity.

### Age Scotland

**0800 12 44 222**

[agescotland.org.uk](http://agescotland.org.uk)

### Age Cymru (Wales)

**0300 303 44 98**

[agecymru.wales](http://agecymru.wales)

### Age NI

**0808 808 7575**

[ageni.org](http://ageni.org)

### British Red Cross

**0344 871 1111**

[redcross.org.uk/get-help](http://redcross.org.uk/get-help)

Practical, local and emotional support. Can provide specialist equipment to people in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to support them with their mobility needs.

### Carers UK

**0808 808 7777 (England, Wales and Scotland)**

**02890 439 843 (Northern Ireland)**

[carersuk.org](http://carersuk.org)

Provides expert advice, information and support to carers. There are links to its national services from the website homepage.

### Macmillan Cancer Support

**0808 808 00 00**

[macmillan.org.uk](http://macmillan.org.uk)

Provides practical, medical and financial support for people affected by cancer. Macmillan Cancer Support has a lot of useful information about getting active after cancer treatment.

### Patient

[patient.info](http://patient.info)

A free health site which contains over 4,000 health information leaflets, a wellbeing centre, free health checks and forums where you can discuss your experiences with others.

### We Are Undefeatable

[weareundefeatable.co.uk](http://weareundefeatable.co.uk)

Practical support to find ways to be active when you're living with a long-term health condition. Includes Five in Five, a five-minute workout as well as booklets and videos to help you get started.

## About this information

This booklet was produced by Marie Curie's Information and Support team. It has been developed with people affected by terminal illness, and health and social care professionals.

If you'd like the list of sources used to create this information, please email [review@mariecurie.org.uk](mailto:review@mariecurie.org.uk) or call the free Marie Curie Support Line on **0800 090 2309\***.

## Notice

The information in this publication is provided for the benefit and personal use of people with a terminal illness, their families and carers.

This information is provided as general guidance for information purposes only. It should not be considered as medical or clinical advice, or used as a substitute for personalised or specific advice from a qualified medical practitioner. In respect of legal, financial or other matters covered by this information, you should also consider seeking specific professional advice about your personal circumstances.

While we try to ensure that this information is accurate, we do not accept any liability arising from its use. Please refer to our website for our full terms and conditions.

### Did you find this information useful?

If you have feedback about this booklet, please email us at [review@mariecurie.org.uk](mailto:review@mariecurie.org.uk) or call the free Marie Curie Support Line on **0800 090 2309\***.

# Marie Curie

Marie Curie is the UK's leading end of life charity. Whatever the illness, wherever you are, we're with you to the end.

**0800 090 2309\***

Marie Curie provides free support over the phone in over 200 languages, and via webchat, to anyone with an illness they're likely to die from and those close to them.

Our team, including nurses and specialist Energy Support Officers, offers practical and emotional support on everything from symptom management and day-to-day care to financial information and bereavement support. Visit [mariecurie.org.uk/support](https://mariecurie.org.uk/support)

We also have an Online Community where you can share thoughts, feelings and experiences at [community.mariecurie.org.uk](https://community.mariecurie.org.uk)

## We can't do it without you

Our free information and support services are entirely funded by your generous donations. Thanks to you, we can continue to offer people what they need, when they need it.

To donate, visit [mariecurie.org.uk/donate](https://mariecurie.org.uk/donate)

\* Calls are free from landlines and mobiles. Your call may be recorded for training and monitoring purposes.

