

# Exercise *and* Ostomies

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**Exercise and physical activity** are known to be important components of achieving and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Exercise is associated with a lower risk of mortality, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, several cancers, anxiety, depression, dementia, weight gain and adverse blood lipid profiles, such as LDL and HDL (Low-density lipoprotein cholesterol and high-density lipoprotein cholesterol.) Improved bone health, cognition, quality of life and physical function are also benefits of regular exercise<sup>1</sup>. One retrospective study found higher rates of parastomal hernias in individuals who were less active<sup>3</sup>.

Although no formal published recommendations exist for exercise after stoma surgery, the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines provide general recommendations for staying active. The guidelines, for able-bodied 18 to 64-year-old individuals, include<sup>1</sup>:

- Moderate to vigorous aerobic physical activity
- At least 150 minutes of aerobic activity per week
- Strength training at least twice per week
- 7 to 9 hours of sleep
- Limited sedentary behaviours

But is it safe for individuals with an ostomy to exercise? YES! After healing, your stoma is quite resilient and, typically, will tolerate exercise well. However, after any surgery, ensure that you follow your surgeon or doctors' advice for your specific return to activity. Light aerobic activity, such as walking, helps to stimulate the return of bowel function and aid in regaining muscle tone that you lost while you were in hospital. Exercise also increases general blood flow and can aid healing, likewise with deep breathing exercises<sup>4</sup>. If you are new to physical activity, you may want to consider working with a registered physiotherapist or registered kinesiologist to help you safely and accurately begin physical activity.

You will want to ease into exercise and physical activity. This applies to both new exercisers and seasoned gym veterans and is particularly true post-operation. Don't do too much too soon. Set realistic goals. After your operation, standing and brief ambulation is enough to begin your exercise journey.

For aerobic activity, start low and slow. Try walking for 15 to 20 minutes about two to three times per week.

- **Moderate activity:** You can maintain the activity while holding a conversation, and you can hear yourself breathing.  
- Moderate aerobic exercise includes brisk walking, biking, swimming, or mowing the lawn.
- **Vigorous activity:** Talking is difficult. You should only be able to say a few words before needing to pause and take a breath.  
- Vigorous aerobic exercise includes running, swimming laps, heavy yard work, or aerobic dancing. *\*Note: what constitutes moderate and vigorous intensity will vary from person to person.*
- Once the activity you are doing no longer challenges you, you can progress to a higher intensity and/or increased time. For example, you can increase your walking pace, resistance on

- cardio machine, add hills into your outdoor walking route, etc.
- Perform a minimum of 150 minutes of aerobic activity per week.

The same principle of low and slow applies to strength training. Make sure to not begin resistance/weight training until your surgeon clears you to do so.

- Train all major muscle groups: chest, shoulders, back, arms, legs, and glutes.
- Perform resistance training a minimum of two times per week.
- Once the activity you are doing no longer challenges you, you can progress to an increased weight, resistance, or number sets/repetitions.

Exercise should not cause you pain. Exertional discomfort is fine and expected; however, you should not experience any sharp or sudden pains during physical activity. Stop immediately if this occurs. Post exercise soreness, also known as DOMS (delayed onset muscle soreness), is normal in the first 12 to 24 hours after a workout. However, you should only feel generally achy, stiff, or tight with a peak of discomfort at 48 to 72 hours. There should not be any sharp, localized, or worsening pain. If this occurs, seek medical attention.

Starting exercise does not have to be complicated. It does not have to involve expensive gym memberships or expensive equipment purchases. Often body weight exercise can give you a thorough and complete strength workout. Simple and cost-effective equipment for home exercise includes resistance bands, hand weights and jump rope. For those who want more diversity, you can find a variety of reasonably priced equipment sets online and in fitness supply stores that can help you progress toward your goals.

What are the risks of physical activity for ostomates?

- Hernias
- Dehydration: If you are getting enough fluids, your urine should be the color of straw.<sup>2</sup> Dehydration can cause muscle cramping, light headedness, and dry mouth. Severe dehydration requires a trip to the hospital.
- Fatigue
- Minor stomal bleeding: Stomas have many blood vessels near the surface and can bleed easily. Small amounts of blood around your stoma may be caused by your pouch rubbing the area and causing irritation<sup>2</sup>. If you have any concerns, call your doctor.

Things to consider:

- Wear a hernia belt for abdominal support
- Wear an ostomy belt to support your apparatus
- Apply perspiration control around your bag to prevent skin irritation
- Hydrate with electrolytes to prevent dehydration
- Pace yourself
- Pay attention to the weather: warmer temperatures can cause dehydration at a faster rate
- Adhere to surgical restrictions

Tips for a successful exercise session:

- Empty your bag prior to starting your activity.
- Have an emergency bag with a complete appliance change and clothing, in case of a leak.
- Know where the nearest bathroom is.
- Wear an ostomy belt or support garment.
- Wear dark coloured clothing to mask bag leaks.
- Wear a pad to catch any mucus or blood<sup>2</sup>. Depending on your type of ostomy, you might have discharge from your rectum when you exercise.
- Listen to your body and rest as needed.

**References:**

1. Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Adults aged 18-64 years: An Integration of Physical Activity, Sedentary Behaviour, and Sleep. (2021). <https://csepguidelines.ca/guidelines/adults-18-64/> Accessed Nov 14, 2024.

2. Seed, Shawna. June 5, 2024 How to Exercise with an ostomy bag. <https://www.webmd.com/ibd-crohns-disease/ulcerative-colitis/uc-exercise-with-ostomy-bag> Accessed Nov 14, 2024.

3. Park, J et al. Parastomal Hernia Rates and Exercise after Ostomy Surgery. *Diseases of the Colon & Rectum* 66(6):p 823-830, June 2023.

4. Talking about Exercise. Colostomy Association. 2013. <https://www.colostomyuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/AboutExercise.pdf> Accessed Nov 14, 2024. ■

Lisa is a member of the Medical Lifestyle Advisory Committee for Ostomy Canada Society

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ences, where she shares her expertise on ostomy care. Additionally, she is a frequent guest speaker at the Vancouver Chapter’s local meetings, always eager to share her knowledge and support with members.

As the Vancouver Chapter expressed in their nomination, Rosemary’s lifelong promotion of ostomy care through her clinical work, advocacy, and volunteerism at local, regional, and national levels has made her a truly deserving recipient of this award. Her dedication to patients, peers, and the community has had a lasting impact, and we are thrilled to celebrate her remarkable achievements.

Congratulations to Rosemary Hill and thank you for your years of tireless service and advocacy for ostomy care.



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