

The Gyms Are Open - But Should I Go Back?

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, gyms and yoga studios across the country temporarily closed to help stop the spread of infection. If you're like many Americans, you haven't spent a lot of time on physical fitness over the last few months.

Now that counties are in various stages of re-opening, the question is:

Is it safe to return to my old exercise habits?

If you have had limited physical activity during the past 3-4 months, it would be wise to see a sports medicine physician for a complete physical exam, says Stephen Noel Henry, D.O., an orthopaedic expert at the University of Miami Sports Medicine Institute. It could protect your body from injury - and your respiratory system from risky exposure - before you get back into a gym or increase the intensity of home workouts.

"Your doctor should order blood work and check for any cardiovascular issues, blood disorders, chronic diseases, or musculoskeletal issues," he says. If you can't make it to a doctor's office, arrange for a telehealth visit over the phone or video chat. You can quickly get your blood drawn at a lab, then your doctor will review the results.

Why? You may have health problems you're not even aware of that can make it unsafe to jump back into exercise or sports without the guidance of your doctor. "If you are immunocompromised or have heart disease, COPD, asthma, or other respiratory conditions, it's recommended that you adhere to CDC guidelines such as wearing a mask and maintain social distance to limit chances of contracting

COVID-19 infection from others inside a gym,” Dr. Henry says.

If you’re out of shape or dealing with an overuse injury, “you may have weak muscles in the core or around your hips, shoulders, or knees,” he says. “You may need guided physical therapy to get your muscles strong enough to withstand the level of fitness you want to achieve. Once you’ve completed physical therapy, your doctor can design a personalized exercise plan to help you transition into regular workouts while avoiding overuse, excessive stress on the heart and lungs, and injury.”

A full physical should be covered by your health insurance and is considered part of your annual wellness services.

Once you get the green light from your doctor, consider this:

“Every gym should be enforcing social distancing, adequate sanitation, and not allowing guests to congregate around exercise machines or in the locker room,” he says.



“Busy locations are offering scheduled times to enter, so you can schedule your workout when the occupancy is lowest.”

Should I wear a mask while exercising?

Dr. Henry says that there is no “one size fits all” answer to whether you should wear

a mask while exercising. For younger people with no underlying health conditions, it might be fine. However, if you have any heart or lung conditions, he says that you should exercise at a lower intensity and really pay attention to your breathing. “If you feel short of breath, get a headache or feel dizzy, stop exercising immediately and contact your physician,” he says.

“The issue with wearing masks during vigorous activity is theoretically you are inhaling carbon dioxide which could trigger a sense of shortness of breath or even anxiety,” he says. This isn’t an issue when you are wearing a mask while going about your day, at work, running errands, and not physically exerting yourself, however, during vigorous exercise there is a theoretical risk”

For those who do wear masks during exercise, Dr. Henry says:

- Do not exercise if you have a fever
- Maintain social distancing even with a mask
- Make sure the mask is not too tight
- Keep hand sanitizer in your pocket for when you remove your mask
- Remember to not touch your face
- Take a second mask in case your first mask gets wet
- Wash your hands before touching your mask
- Wash masks regularly

There are some masks on the market designed for wearing while exercising or playing sports. These masks have unique filtration systems. But wearing any face mask during exercise can be dangerous for anyone with respiratory issues. If you’re interested in trying an exercise mask, ask a sports medicine doctor first if this is safe for you.

Decided the gym is too risky? You can still improve your fitness

Dr. Henry advises people to follow a home fitness program that is designed for you by your sports medicine doctor. This will ensure your workouts are effective for meeting your fitness or weight-loss goals, safe to do without a professional correcting your form, and tailored to accommodate any medical conditions or physical limitations you may have.

“Most home exercise programs have varying levels of impact,” he says. “Begin with low-intensity, low impact exercises that involve less jumping. Every two to three weeks, perform each move at a slightly higher level to advance at the right pace. After six weeks, your muscles will adapt.”

Basic home workout routines should engage the whole body. Dr. Henry recommends raising your heart rate by jogging in place. Then try a combination of low-impact exercises like modified jumping jacks, planks to strengthen the core, and air squats. If your body can tolerate them, burpees are challenging and effective. “You can even use a broomstick to stretch your muscles surrounding your scapula to prevent shoulder pain.”

If you’d like to get into running, try a running app. It can keep track of your distance, time, speed, and calories burned. Apps that offer a running program, in addition to tracking, can guide you to gradually increase your mileage at a safe pace.

You can stay motivated at home

“Depending on the max heart rate for your age, aim for the perfect ‘zone’ to achieve your goals such as fat burning or cardio,” he says. Invest in a heart rate monitor to

get a more accurate measurement of your output and progress.

You'll want to avoid burnout and overtraining syndrome, which can set you back and derail your motivation to stick with your exercise program. Take short breaks between exercises and rest at least one to two days per week.

If you feel yourself getting bored with the same routine, try new exercises at the same level of intensity. Now is a good time to get a bike so you can enjoy the outdoors and get a good cardio workout while physically distancing.

Stay hydrated, he says. "You can too easily forget to drink water when you spend the day at home."

**Due to rising coronavirus cases in various regions, check with your local health department for updates on business openings and closures in your area.*

Dana Kantrowitz is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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Build a More Resilient Immune System

"Now more than ever, the coronavirus challenges us to become our own best health advocates," says Dr. Karen Koffler. "In doing so, we protect ourselves so that if we become exposed to the virus, we may only develop a mild case. It all begins with a healthy immune system, and that's created by how we live, eat, sleep, and move." Read more.