



# WellnessOne Newsletter

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*Published by WellnessOne of Redding*

## 10 Surprising Times to Hit the Gym

*Reprinted from Mercola.com | March 02 2012*

**By Dr. Mercola**

I have long extolled the benefits of a regular exercise program, as it offers improves virtually every aspect of health, from boosting brain function to helping prevent cancer and slowing the rate of aging.

There are many misconceptions about *when* exercise is appropriate, however, with some mistakenly believing that if you have a cold or arthritis, for instance, you shouldn't work out.

The truth is, there are many surprising scenarios when, while you might be tempted to lounge on the couch, exercise is actually just what the doctor ordered.

*Everyday Health* has done a great job of compiling 10 such examples, and I want to expand on each one of them below.

### 1. Recovering from Surgery

Hitting the gym after you've had minor surgery can be highly beneficial, helping to both decrease side effects and get you back into the swing of your daily life faster.

This includes cancer patients, who often receive surgery as part of conventional treatment.

A report by Macmillan Cancer Support notes that cancer patients and cancer survivors should exercise at least 2.5 hours a week,<sup>1</sup> and cites an excerpt from the American College of Sports Medicine consensus statement on exercise guidelines for cancer survivors, which states:

*"Exercise is safe both during and after most types of cancer treatment... Patients are advised to avoid inactivity and return to normal daily activities as soon as possible after surgery, and during adjuvant cancer treatments."*



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You will, of course, need to be mindful of the level of intensity and avoid exercises that may stress a surgical incision or repair, but generally speaking the sooner you can get moving after surgery, the better.

## 2. You Have a Cold

Two long-forgotten studies from the late 1990s indicate that not only is it safe to exercise when you have an upper respiratory tract infection, it could actually make you feel better -- even if it doesn't speed up your recovery.<sup>ii, iii</sup>

In a nutshell, the studies found that a cold virus had no impact on participants' lung function or ability to exercise, and did not alter how long it took to recover. That said, those who exercised were more likely to report that their workouts helped relieve their symptoms.

When you exercise while you're fighting off a cold, the "dose" of exercise is very important. Over-exercising can actually place more stress on your body, which can suppress your immune system, so it appears you should keep the intensity of your workouts on the moderate level if you're sick. As noted in *Exercise and Sport Sciences Reviews*:<sup>iv</sup>

*"Prolonged intense exercise causes immunosuppression, whereas moderate-intensity exercise improves immune function and potentially reduces risk and severity of respiratory viral infections."*



So you might just go for a brisk walk if you are coming down with a cold, or simply tone down your regular workout. As far as *prevention* goes, there is evidence that regular, moderate exercise can reduce your risk for respiratory illness by boosting your immune system. In fact, one study found that people who exercised regularly (five or more days a week) cut their risk of having a cold by close to 50 percent.<sup>v</sup> And in the event that they did catch a cold, their symptoms were much less severe than among those who did not exercise.

## 3. Headaches

Inactivity is actually a risk factor for headaches, as physical activity works to alleviate headaches in a number of ways, such as:

- Releasing pain-killing endorphins
- Reducing stress and improving cardiovascular fitness
- Improving blood flow to your brain
- Reducing muscle tension and fatigue

## 4. Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)

If you have the lung disease COPD, exercise can help to improve your circulation, helping your body to use oxygen more efficiently. It may also help to strengthen your heart, improve your symptoms, and boost your energy levels so you can perform more daily activities without fatigue or becoming out of breath.

## 5. Pregnancy

If you are healthy and your pregnancy is normal, regular exercise can improve your and your baby's health, offering such benefits as:

- Eases back and other musculoskeletal pain
- Lowers maternal blood pressure
- Reduces swelling
- A lower risk of gestational diabetes
- Improves postpartum mood, including sadness

Research also shows exercise during pregnancy has a [beneficial impact on your baby's heart](#) by reducing fetal heart rate and increasing heart rate variability, and may also help you maintain a healthy weight, and have an easier labor and faster recovery from birth. One way to look at exercise during pregnancy is that you are conditioning your body for labor and childbirth. As with most physically demanding things in life, if your body is in shape, you and your baby will have a much easier time of it.



## 6. Osteoarthritis or Joint Pain

If you have [joint pain, exercise is a must](#); it helps prevent and relieve joint pain through a number of mechanisms, including strengthening key supportive muscles, restoring flexibility, improving bone density and joint function, and facilitating weight loss.

The notion that exercise is detrimental to your joints is a misconception, as there is no evidence to support this belief. Quite the contrary, actually, as inactivity promotes muscle weakness, joint contractures, and loss of range of motion, which can lead to more pain and loss of function, and even less activity. To break this potentially devastating cycle, regular exercise is essential.

If you have osteoarthritis or joint pain and you find that you're in pain for longer than one hour after your exercise session, you should slow down or choose another form of exercise. Assistive devices are also helpful to decrease the pressure on affected joints during your workout. You may also want to work with a physical therapist or qualified personal trainer who can develop a safe range of activities for you. If the exercise causes pain that persists longer than several hours it most likely was too much.

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## 7. Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)

Dietary strategies are key for [healing irritable bowel syndrome](#) at the foundational level, however exercise can help improve IBS symptoms, as well. In one study, exercise led to improvements in problems like cramps, bloating, constipation and diarrhea, with, 43 percent of exercisers showing a significant improvement in their symptoms.<sup>vi</sup>

## 8. Menopause

Just three hours of exercise a week has been shown to significantly improve both mental and physical health in menopausal women, including relieving symptoms of menopause and improving quality of life.<sup>vii</sup> While ideally you should simply *continue* your exercise program through menopause and beyond, it's virtually never too late to start an exercise program. So if you're nearing menopause and you're not yet a regular exerciser, now's the perfect time to start.

## 9. Chronic Pain

Exercise can help with long-term pain relief for a variety of conditions, including osteoarthritis, back and musculoskeletal pain. Furthermore, because exercise often leads to improved posture, range of motion and functionality of your body, it can help treat the underlying source of your pain as well as help prevent chronic back pain. Exercises that can be particularly helpful for chronic pain include stretching, resistance training, and swimming.



## 10. Quitting Smoking

Exercise is a potent ally in your decision to quit smoking, as withdrawal symptoms and cigarette cravings decrease during and after exercise. In one study, published in the journal *Nicotine & Tobacco Research*, 25 male and female smokers, who had smoked for an average of 19 years, received a brief smoking cessation counseling session. They were also given nicotine patches. They were then randomly assigned either to an exercise resistance-training group or a "contact control" group. Remarkably, the exercise group was TWICE as successful in abstaining from smoking compared to the control group.<sup>viii</sup>

### Are You Ready to Get Started?

There's an overwhelming amount of evidence confirming that exercise is a key player in disease reduction, optimal mental, emotional and physical health, and longevity. It's really a phenomenal way to get the most out of your life! After reviewing 40 papers published between 2006 and 2010, researchers found that exercise reduces the risk of about [two dozen health conditions](#), ranging from cancer and heart disease to type 2 diabetes, stroke, dementia and depression. Exercise also slows down the rate of aging itself, even stimulating the regeneration of the energy-producing mitochondria in your cells, providing perhaps the closest example of a real life fountain of youth as we will ever find.

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Ideally, you will have made exercise a regular part of your life long before you reach your "golden" years ... but if you haven't, there's no better time to start than the present. Research has shown that regular exercise, even initiated late in life, offers profound health benefits.

Many public health guidelines still focus primarily on the aerobic component of exercise, but this limited activity can lead to imbalances that may actually prevent optimal health. This is why it's so important to maintain a *well-balanced* fitness regimen, that includes not just aerobics, but also strength training, stretching, and [high-intensity interval training](#) like CrossFit.

If you're exercising with a specific health condition present, always remember to listen to your body and if you feel you need a break, take time to rest. Even exercising for a few minutes a day is better than not exercising at all, and you'll likely find that your stamina increases and you're able to complete more challenging workouts with each passing day.



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