

# Exercising with a Thoracic Aortic Aneurysm (TAA) or After Aortic Dissection Repair

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## Why is daily activity important?

Exercise is part of a healthy lifestyle, and it should be included in the treatment plan for all patients with aortic disease. Being physically active and exercising every day can have immediate and long-term health benefits. Most importantly, regular activity can improve your quality of life.

## What are the benefits of regular physical activity?

- Improves your mood
- Increases your energy
- Lowers your blood pressure and cholesterol levels
- Improves your heart's function
- Helps you maintain a healthy weight
- Lowers your risk for diabetes

Make it a goal to do some activity for a total of 30 minutes every day. If it is easier, you can divide your activity sessions into smaller blocks of time.

Moderate intensity aerobic activity and strength training are recommended.

**Moderate intensity** means exercising hard enough to raise your heart rate while still being able to carry on a conversation.

## How much should I exercise every week?

After your doctor says it's okay for you to exercise, we recommend a weekly total of:

- 150 minutes of moderate intensity **aerobic activity**. Aerobic activity

means moving your large muscles in a continuous way for a longer period of time. Walking, swimming, or light cycling are examples.

- Build up to doing 150 minutes per week.
- We recommend exercising 20 to 60 minutes per day, for 3-5 days per week.
- At least 40 minutes of light **strengthening exercises**. These are exercises that make your muscles stronger, like light weightlifting, planks, leg lifts, or yoga. You should talk with your doctor or physical therapist about the intensity of your isometric exercises.

### **What exercises are safe for me to do?**

- Aerobic activities like walking, jogging, running, yoga, and Pilates are safe.
- Light strengthening exercises (such as light weightlifting, planks, leg lifts, and yoga), where you tighten your muscles but do not move your joints, may not be safe for you if you have recently had aortic surgery or an acute aortic dissection. Your doctor can give you a letter explaining what exercises are safe or not safe for you, if you'd like.
- Sexual activities are safe.

**Talk with your doctor if you are thinking about doing more intense aerobic exercises.** They may recommend a treadmill stress test to decide whether it is safe for you to do more intense physical activity.

### **How do I stay safe while exercising?**

- Take your prescribed blood pressure medication every day. This will reduce your risk of developing high blood pressure with exercise.
- Before exercising, measure your blood pressure. Do not exercise if your resting blood pressure is not well-controlled. Talk to your doctor about

blood pressure numbers are safe for you during your appointment.

- Do not overexert yourself. **Overexertion** is when you move your body or exercise too hard. You can prevent overexertion by checking your **rate of perceived exertion (RPE)** (see the section on this below).
- Lifting light weights is okay.
  - Make sure you stop lifting weights a long time before you can't do another repetition.
  - Avoid straining or holding your breath when weightlifting. This causes your blood pressure to go up. Try to match your breathing with the exercise you're doing (you can ask your physical therapist for instructions on this).
  - The amount of weight that you can lift safely is different for everyone. Your doctor may give you a weight limit for how much you can lift, and you should follow your doctor's instructions.
  - Your weight limit is the most weight that you can lift without straining your chest or stomach.
- Avoid contact sports.

### **How will I rate the intensity of my activity?**

During aerobic activity, you will rate your level of effort. This means that your care team wants you to figure out how hard the activity feels for you. This is called **perceived exertion**, or effort. Use the table on the next page while you are doing an activity to rate your exertion level. The perceived exertion scale ranges from 6 to 20. 6 means "no exertion at all" (the exercise takes no effort) and 20 means "maximal exertion" (the exercise takes the most amount of effort you could possibly give).

## How will I use the perceived exertion scale?

During activity, take a moment to sense how you are feeling. Now compare that feeling to one of the numbers on the **rate of perceived exertion (RPE)** scale (pictured below).

For example, if you are sitting in a chair, you might feel like you are at a level of 6. This means it is "no exertion" (or no effort) on the perceived exertion scale. Walking at a normal pace might feel like an 11 ("fairly light exertion") or a 13 ("somewhat hard") effort. A rating of 11-13 is your exercise goal. **Do not exercise at "very hard" or "very, very hard" level of effort (a 17 or more on the scale).**

Identify the level of exertion you are feeling:		Activity zone instructions
6	No exertion	
7	very very light exertion	
8		
9	very light exertion	
10		
11	fairly light exertion	This is your exercise goal: a rating of 11-13 is ideal
12		
13	somewhat hard	
14		Slow down your movements to get back to the green zone
15	Hard	
16		
17	very hard	Stop and rest
18		
19	very very hard	
20		

## What are the signs and symptoms of overexertion?

During exercise, it is normal to feel short of breath, sweat, and have a faster heartbeat than normal. If exercise puts too much strain on your heart, you may experience signs of overexertion. The following symptoms are things to watch for:

- Severe shortness of breath
- Chest pain or tightness
- Unusual or extreme tiredness
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Fast or irregular heartbeat

**Steps to take if you have any of these symptoms while you are active:**

1. Slow down.
2. Rest while standing.
3. Rest while sitting.
4. **Stop** the activity if your symptoms do not get better after steps 1-3.
5. **Call 911** if your chest pain or other symptoms do not go away.



**Never stop exercising suddenly.  
This may cause you to feel dizzy or lightheaded.  
Always do a cool down routine.**

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