Covid-19, physical activity and rest

On any ordinary day, it's important to be doing the right things for your physical (and mental) health. During a pandemic, it's paramount. Here's why reprioritising physical activity and rest could help you to avoid a Covid complication, plus keep your wellbeing in check…

Reprioritise your physical health

No matter what level of lockdown you're in, whether you've been vaccinated or not, or if you're back at the office or working from home, the last year and a bit has been challenging for everyone. The truth is, whether it's in-person or virtual i.e. Zoom, Teams, Skype etc., you're probably all meeting' ed out, sitting too long at your desk and not doing enough physical activity. Here's why combining exercise and physical activity is a gamechanger.

Rethink of exercise as physical activity

It's recommended that we do 30 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise a day – or 150 minutes a week – to stay healthy. The good news is that if you combine exercise with physical activity and find the right balance of exercising and moving every day, it may be possible to counteract the negative effects of sitting most of the day.

Physical activity may include:

- Dance
- Play
- Gardening
- Waking around the shops

The benefits of exercise and physical activity

Regular exercise and physical activity may:

- Help you control your weight.
- Help your body manage blood sugar and insulin levels.
- Improve blood circulation.
- Help to sharpen your thinking, learning, and judgment skills.
- Improve your mood and overall mental health.
- Strengthen your bones and muscles.
- Ease muscle strain and improve muscle activity.
- Improve your sleep.

Schedule sleep and rest into your day

On the other side of the health spectrum, but equally important as exercise for your health, is sleep and rest. Sleep is essential for boosting immunity and bolstering physical and mental wellbeing. During a pandemic, which causes ongoing stress, a good night's sleep (including some rest during the day) is more imperative than ever. Generally, your sleep patterns are probably a bit out of sync – especially if you work from home – as your daily schedule is probably out of sync too.

If you work from home, you might find that you are going to bed later, then waking up super early to get all your work done before your day of virtual meetings. There might also be the temptation to oversleep or sleep more when working from home. In addition, we are more worried about life right now, which leads to increased anxiety, which impacts our sleep. But creating a "sleep schedule" and sticking to it will have a big impact on your day-to-day life.

The ever-changing Covid "mental load"

There are also additional stressors that impact our sleep, such as heightened vigilance around our health and safety in addition to social isolation. Not a good combination. Most of us don't even have our "usual routine" to fall back on e.g. eating breakfast, dropping the kids at school and working at the office to maintain our sleep cycles.

You might find that you are working harder than you ever did and keeping up with the kids ever-changing school routines (physical versus online lessons; the stop-and-start of school sport) is challenging at best. The "mental load" of trying to remember all the ever-changing variables saps our energy and leads to constant fatigue. At the very least, a lack of sleep makes it hard to concentrate and makes you more irritable with those around you. Just by reprioritising rest and relaxation into your day — 30 minutes for hobbies, me-time, downtime, meditation, moving or simply reading – could make a big difference.

5 sleep solutions to try:

1. Intentionally structure time in your day to unwind and relax. Meditate if you can.
2. Look after your physical wellbeing by sticking to a healthy diet, avoiding stimulants and including exercise (well before bedtime) or some movement daily.
3. Use your bed and bedroom mostly for sleep. Adjust the lighting, room temperature, bed linen and reduce 'noise' by staying away from cellphones and TV, if possible.
4. Create regular sleep-wake routines that are manageable and healthy – and avoid having day time naps, if possible.
5. Keep your daily routine structured. Exercise, move, meditate or stretch when you are feeling fatigued. Try eating at the same time of the day. Continue to shower or bath at the usual time and get dressed, even if you are social distancing.

"Besides the well-known benefits of exercise, doing some form of physical activity will help to create some routine in your day in these extraordinary times. Schedule time for "movement" (whatever that looks like for you) into your diary, like you do all your other meetings. Importantly, try to get enough sleep."
David van der Knaap, CEO OracleMed Health