

# A guide to progressing your strengthening exercises

Information for patients



Your physiotherapist will set you specific guidelines for your exercise programme. The exercises should help to reduce your symptoms and improve your strength. Your body adapts to the exercises you do and so the exercises need to be made gradually harder over a period of months. This means you will continue to make improvements in your strength which will help you to keep doing the things you enjoy and help prevent your symptoms from coming back.

The information in this leaflet will give you some general guidance as to how to best progress your exercises.

If you have any specific concerns, you should always re-consult your physiotherapist.

## Getting started

When you start, you might only need to use your own body weight or light weights such as a water bottle to stimulate the muscle enough to get some strengthening gains. After about 2-4 weeks your body gets used to your exercises, your muscles get stronger and you should start to see your symptoms reduce.

When you start to feel this happen and the exercises get easier, you may need to make things more challenging.

## Rating of perceived exertion (RPE) scale

This is a scale you use to decide how hard you are working whilst doing your exercises. The scale goes from 0 to 10. Rest is 0 where you do no exercise at all. Maximal effort (the highest level) is 10. However, exercising at an RPE of 10 is not required to stimulate gains in muscle strength and size.

The rest of the scale is shown overleaf.

Rating (RPE)	Level of Work
0	Rest
1	Very easy
2	Easy
3	Moderate
4	Slightly hard
5	Hard
6	Hard
7	Very hard
8	Very hard
9	Very hard
10	Maximal effort

Building your exercise into blocks of 4 weeks can be helpful as your muscles gets stronger, followed by a recovery break or 'rest week' to prevent overloading which can lead to injury. In the 'rest week' you would rest from strengthening exercise, but keep active in other ways you enjoy e.g. walking or swimming. An example of a 4-week block is shown below:

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5
RPE 5-6	RPE 6-7	RPE 7-8	RPE 5-6	Rest week

You can change the RPE by adding in more repetitions of an exercise or by increasing the weight. Your physiotherapist can advise you on which would be best for you:

- More repetitions: e.g. RPE 5-6 is 3 sets of 10 then RPE 7-8 could be met by doing 3 sets of 15 instead.

Or

- Increasing the weight: e.g. if RPE 5-6 is using a 2kg weight, RPE 7-8 might be using a 5kg weight.

**Top tip:** You should only change one aspect of the exercises at a time. So if you are doing more repetitions of an exercise then the weight should stay the same. You would not increase the weight and the repetitions in the same session. This helps to avoid overloading and causing pain or injury.

## Rest and recovery

Resting can be just as important as exercising. You should allow enough time in between sets and exercise sessions to let the muscles recover. If you overload a muscle too much, you can have a negative effect on strengthening.

Between sets of strengthening exercises, you should take time to rest. Minimum rest time between sets should be 30 seconds. If your RPE is high, 7-10, you may wish to take 90 seconds to 2 minutes of rest between sets. This prevents exercising on over fatigued muscles.

You should try to have 48 hours of rest between each strengthening session if possible. If you are doing leg strengthening one day, it is safe to do arm strengthening the next day.

Drinking enough water is also important for recovery. As a general guide we should try to drink 6-8 glasses of fluid, preferably water, per day. This might increase when you are exercising regularly.

**Top tip:** When you begin strengthening, it can be common to get some muscle ache the next day. This is called delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS). This is normal and shows your muscles are adapting to the exercise you are doing. Resting, stretching, staying hydrated and eating well can all help to prevent or manage DOMS.

## Further information

Further information is available at the following website:

**NHS UK: How to Improve your Strength and Flexibility**

[www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/how-to-improve-strength-flexibility/](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/how-to-improve-strength-flexibility/)

Alternatively, you can scan the QR Code below to visit the website:

