

## Exercise therapy for intermittent claudication

### ***What is intermittent claudication?***

If you have peripheral arterial disease (PAD), you may experience leg pain when you walk, a condition known as intermittent claudication. The leg pain is caused by reduced blood circulation to your legs. Because walking causes leg pain, people with claudication often reduce their physical activity. Unfortunately, this can worsen both the circulation in your legs and other medical problems such as high blood pressure, weight problems, and diabetes.

### ***How does exercise help?***

Exercise therapy is the main treatment for intermittent claudication. Over a few months, exercise therapy gradually relieves your leg pain when you walk. Exercise has been shown to relieve leg pain during walking, increase the distance and time you can walk before your legs start to hurt, and improve overall heart health.



### ***What is exercise therapy?***

Exercise therapy is a structured or formal program, usually conducted in a clinic or through a hospital outpatient program. An exercise therapy program gradually and safely increases the distance you walk.

Exercise is usually prescribed three or more times per week, for 30 to 60 minutes each time, for at least 3 months. The benefits from exercise take time to develop and usually appear over 1 to 2 months. Benefits continue to increase over 3 to 6 months.

### ***How long should I exercise?***

To improve circulation in your legs, you must walk until you experience leg pain. Exercises that do not cause leg pain, such as riding a bicycle, do not reduce leg pain. You should walk on a treadmill or track, under medical supervision, usually three or more times a week, until moderately severe pain occurs. On a scale of one to five, where one is mild pain and five is very severe pain, moderately severe pain would be three on the scale. You should walk until the pain is moderately severe and then rest briefly to allow the pain to decrease. You will repeat this exercise-rest-exercise cycle several times, until you have walked for a total of 35 minutes in the first few sessions of the program.

### ***Should I increase my time?***

Once you can walk for the first 8 to 10 minutes with much less pain, you should increase your exercise intensity to achieve a moderate level of pain during walking. You should gradually increase exercise time by a few minutes each time until you can walk for a total of 50 minutes.

### ***Should I take any precautions?***

The moderate leg pain that will occur with exercise is just what you need to feel for the exercise to work. However, if you experience pain in your chest, arms, neck, or throat, you should stop exercising immediately and report the pain to the medical professional supervising your exercise program. This type of pain could mean that not enough blood is reaching the heart.

#### ***Source:***

Exercise therapy. Vascular Disease Foundation. Available at <http://www.vdf.org> Accessed February 22, 2006.

