

# Running

## *A guide for people with heart conditions*



**ACPICR**

Association of Chartered Physiotherapists  
In Cardiovascular Rehabilitation

Many people enjoy running either outside or on a treadmill in the gym or at home. There are Parkruns and other organised events, hill running or gentle runs on a weekend for example.

### What are the specific benefits?

- It is an activity that will improve your aerobic fitness but can be inexpensive to do
- You can do it almost anytime and anywhere making it a flexible activity
- Running, like all exercise, can boost your mood and improve your psychological well being
- For many it is a sociable activity but for others something they prefer to do alone



### When could I start?

It is recommended that you discuss this with your cardiac rehabilitation (CR) team. An assessment with the CR exercise practitioner will determine if you are ready. Running can form part of your individual CR programme both in the exercise sessions and at home.

People who have had a heart attack and/or a stent fitted may be able to start quite soon after their event.

People who have had heart surgery will need to wait a little longer. This may be up to 12 weeks post-surgery. The physical impact of running may increase breast bone soreness. How long you wait may depend on your cardiac surgery centre, as guidance can differ between centres, but also how you are recovering individually. Your CR exercise practitioner will be able to advise you.

People who have a permanent pacemaker or implantable cardioverter device (ICD) should wait at least 6 weeks after the device has been fitted to allow the wires to settle in.

### How can I get started?

You should attend CR sessions and learn when and how to structure your running programme. You will need to build up your fitness level by walking, gradually increasing the distance before moving onto running. Once you can walk comfortably for at least 15 mins, with good control in your legs and steady breathing, without any heart and breathing symptoms eg on a treadmill at a pace of 6.5kph (4 mph), then you may be ready. For most people running starts at a speed of 7.0 to 7.5 kph (4.5 – 4.7 mph).

If you have not run before, then it is best to do no longer than 5 mins at 7-7.5 kph. Then walk at 5.0 – 6.5 kph for 5 minutes and if you're feeling ok alternate between walking and running for a total of 20 minutes. Each week you can gradually reduce the time of walking and increase the time of running and by the end of 6-8 weeks you should be able to run for 15 – 20 mins at 7.0-7.5 kph.

Your heart rate can be monitored in the CR session or outside using a reliable fitness tracker to ensure it is not too high and has room to fluctuate within a safe zone.

If the running is a challenge (either physically or mentally), then you need to review and agree on a more individualised programme of progression with your CR exercise practitioner.

*Stop exercising if you experience any chest pain, palpitations, dizziness or light-headedness. If the symptoms do not go away promptly with rest and/or GTN spray/tablets seek medical advice as soon as possible.*

## What about warm up and cool down?

**Warm up-** Minimum of 10-15 minutes. Should feel 'light' intensity. This will probably be walking, starting slowly and building to a brisk walk. Experienced runners, with a good fitness level, will find they can use a light jog as a warm-up.

**Aerobic workout-** Aim to build up your run to at least 20 minutes (as described above) where the exertion feels 'somewhat hard'. Focus first on gradually increasing the time and distance, then increase speed if you wish to. The main way to benefit is to run at a pace suitable to your own level of fitness.

**Cool down-** Minimum of 10 minutes. Finish the session with a brisk walk or slower jog, gradually slowing down again to a gentle walk. Leg stretches at the end of the cool down period may help to reduce muscle soreness and also improve leg flexibility.

## How should I feel during my session?

Listen to your body and think about how it compares with how you feel during the rest of your CR exercise session.

Working comfortably at moderate intensity is recommended. Strenuous exercise should be avoided as this may cause problems for some people. Building up your fitness with walking will mean running doesn't feel strenuous.

Your breathing rate and heart rate should increase as you run but you should still be able to talk in a sentence and able to continue comfortably. It is fine to feel that you are exerting yourself so long as you are not struggling. If you feel exhausted you may have worked too hard or for too long.

## Other things to consider

- Having rest days is extremely important. Let your body recover because running has an impact on your joints and muscles
- Dependent on how often and how long you run for, you may need to do other aerobic activities during the week. Do some strength training on 3 other days of the week as well if you can
- Find yourself a good pair of comfortable running shoes
- Ensure you are safe if running alone, inform a relative/spouse of your route and take a phone
- Make sure you have taken your medications, as prescribed, prior to any exercise
- Don't exercise immediately after eating a large meal and remember to take a bottle of water with you
- Do not exercise if you feel unwell
- Look for local Parkruns, running clubs or try an App like the NHS 'couch to 5k' or 'active 10'
- Music is a great companion but make sure you run to your own pace not to the pace of the music.
- Think how the temperature and environment will change your running. Hot, cold or windy weather will make the exertion more difficult, so reduce the pace and the amount of time you are running for
- If you can, avoid steep hills or difficult terrain initially and try to avoid running in highly polluted locations such as busy roads
- Competitive runners may need referral on to a sports cardiologist for further assessment



**Stop exercising if you experience any chest discomfort, palpitations, dizziness or light-headedness. If the symptoms do not go away promptly with rest and/or your GTN spray/tablets, seek medical advice as soon as possible.**

This guidance is based on available evidence and expert opinion.

Produced by the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Cardiovascular Rehabilitation [www.acpicr.com](http://www.acpicr.com).

This leaflet is not intended to replace the advice that your doctor or cardiovascular rehabilitation team give you based on their expert knowledge of your condition.

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