



By Carron Manning,
Co-Founder, EXi

BUILDING RESILIENCE TO COVID-19 THROUGH PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Carron is a physiotherapist who has a great deal of experience in prescribing exercise to those who most need it and has seen first-hand the dramatic effects this has on people's lives. She co-founded EXi with her husband Lewis, also a physio, to create a product which could help everyone, regardless of age, disease status or current fitness level, to get active and improve their health.

Improving our physical fitness can make the difference in our fight against COVID-19 and this message needs to be pushed out by healthcare systems worldwide. This article discusses how increasing our levels of physical activity and reducing our risk for long term health conditions, will improve our resilience to the coronavirus. It's more important than ever that we take control of our own health, and that we give people the tools and support to help them get active.

There has never been a time in modern history where it has been more important for us to stay fit and healthy. COVID-19, whilst it continues to dramatically affect our way of life, has caused the most suffering to those with underlying health conditions and has highlighted the huge disparities that exist in health. While we await a vaccination everyone should question what they can do to increase their resilience to the dreaded virus, but also how they can protect their health, and their future health from long-term conditions, and exercise should be at the top of the list.

If exercise were a drug, it would be a pharmaceutical blockbuster, said Simon Stevens, CEO of the NHS. A recent study at Stanford University described an acute bout of exercise as causing a 'molecular explosion' in the blood, altering thousands of molecules with each exercise session. It is relatively unknown that in clinical trials, exercise is shown to have the similar effects as drugs when put side by side. A report in 2015 by the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges pointed to exercise as being the "miracle cure" for a host of diseases, stating that "regular

exercise can help to prevent dementia, type-2 diabetes, some cancers, depression, heart disease and other serious common conditions – reducing the risk of each by at least 30%." There is no known medication which produces the same wide ranging and potent effects as exercise.

Yet we have become the victims of our own success when it comes to medical advances over the past 50 years. It has become easier to pop a pill, to deal with our rising blood pressure or elevated blood sugars, rather than dealing with the underlying causes. Our lives are becoming more sedentary and convenient than ever: Here in the UK for example, 40% of the adult population do not meet the recommended levels of physical activity (this is estimated to be as high as 76% in the US). The knock-on effect of this is that we are seeing increasing rates of chronic diseases: Almost 10% of the UK adult population now has type 2 diabetes, and this statistic is replicated in most nations of the developed world. The situation is predicted to get much worse over the next few years, and our healthcare systems are already struggling to cope with this – things need to change, and the fitness world needs to move closer to healthcare to take this challenge on.

Whilst there is no scientific data yet on how physical activity may enhance the immune response against COVID-19, we certainly do have enough evidence to make some assumptions. We know that a single exercise session will mobilise your immune cells or lymphocytes, increasing your immune surveillance, so they are ready to minimise the impact of an invading virus. We also know that people who have higher cardiorespiratory fitness levels generally have improved immune responses and may be less likely to report symptoms of specific viral illnesses. So when it comes to the coronavirus, your level of physical fitness will not stop you from becoming infected, but the available scientific evidence from research in other viral infections would indicate that physically active people will have less severe symptoms, shorter recovery times, and they may be less likely to infect others they come into contact with.

The statistics from the coronavirus pandemic have been stark: We know that the main non-modifiable risk factors for death following a COVID-19 infection are older age and being male. People from BAME communities are also at higher risk, although there is some debate as to whether this is due to ethnicity, or because they are more likely to be disproportionately affected by multiple stressors during the pandemic.

When we look at the more modifiable risk factors, almost all of which can be positively influenced by physical activity. Obesity has emerged as a major consideration:



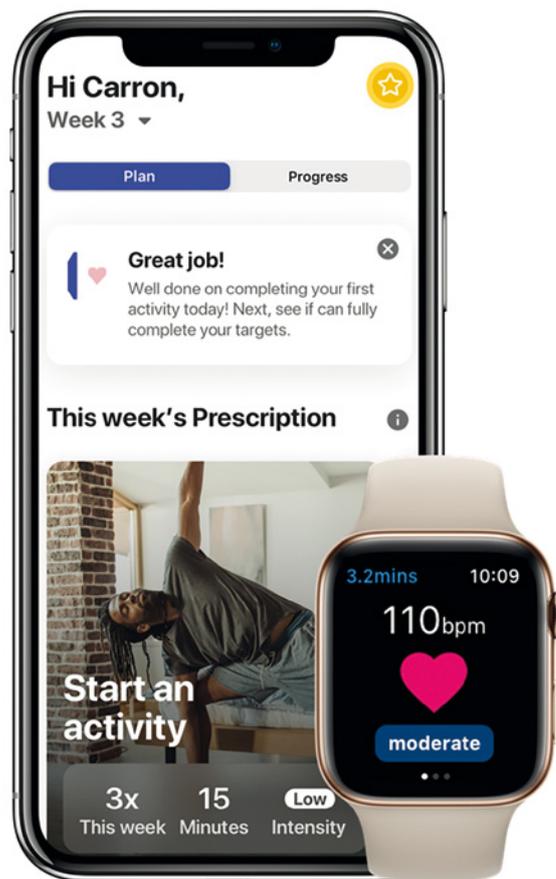
Obese patients also have a 33% greater risk of dying from a COVID infection. Diabetes has also featured heavily: 27% of all people who died from COVID in England between March and May had diabetes. A recent study of 20,133 UK patients in hospital with Covid-19 found that 31% had heart disease. About 90% of people who die from COVID-19 have at least one underlying health condition, and this grim statistic will have to be addressed, particularly if we ever experience a pandemic such as this again.

In the UK, Public Health England have called for action on obesity in the COVID-19 fight, and have said that your risk of hospitalisation, requiring transfer to ITU/being ventilated, and finally death, will all progressively increase with increasing BMI. They have also released up to date obesity figures, and 63% of adults in England are now classified as overweight or obese – a rise of 10% since 1993. Another hugely important factor is that periods of isolation and confinement may cause an elevation of stress hormones such as cortisol, which can inhibit many critical functions of our immune system – physical activity is known to counteract this. The effects of exercise on mental wellbeing are well known, and whilst the effects of lockdown on mental health have not yet been fully documented, one would assume that this will be profound. So how do we get exercise to the people who most need it? How do we ensure that every single person knows exactly how much activity they should do to improve their fitness, improve their resilience, and improve their health based on the analysis of their individual situation? How do we increase the opinion of exercise as being essential to normal human function (and an essential component of medical care) rather than simply a leisure activity enjoyed by those who can afford it? And how can we empower people to take control of their own health?

“There is now more focus than ever on health,” said Dr Harpreet Sood who is working with EXi. “What we need is a complete mind shift with regards to the value of physical activity. People with chronic conditions need to understand how everyday movement can help them to manage, and sometimes even cure their conditions. Simply telling patients what to do is not enough – long-term behaviour change is extremely hard and requires ongoing support and access to resources over time. What we want to see is the normalisation of exercise prescription at the point of care.”

Sir Muir Gray, a renowned British physician, has been working with the team at EXi, the award-winning evidence-based exercise prescription app. He explains: “If the physical benefits of exercise could be distilled into a pill, it would be labelled a miracle cure. Because being active is a better recipe for good health than any drug. The fact is there is no single medical condition that will be made worse by moderate intensity exercise, and it really can bring dramatic results.”

At EXi (<https://exi.life/>) we believe that everyone should have access to their own personalised exercise prescription, that is set at exactly the right level for them and is scalable to all. We believe that exercise should be considered as important as drugs when it comes to both preventing disease but also when managing many long-term health conditions. There exists an opportunity now to vastly improve our health both for our current situation and improving resilience to COVID-19, but also to prevent chronic diseases for the future: Exercise and fitness should play the greatest role in that.



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