



If You Are Chronically Ill, with Little Energy to Exercise, What Should You Do?

—Rachel Straub, MS, CSCS

According to the American College of Sports Medicine, all healthy adults should engage in exercise most days of the week. However, if you are afflicted with chronic health conditions (whether cancer, chronic fatigue, Lyme disease, or something else), the last thing you probably feel like doing is exercise. Besides, you usually don't have the energy for it—and if you've tried, you might have found yourself feeling even worse!

If this rings a bell for you, what should you do? If you are housebound and ill and doing nothing, pain may be increasing simply due to lack of movement. However, even if you are in bed, you can help yourself by doing a few simple exercises regularly.

Below are some vital bed exercises. How often should you do them? Ideally, daily. For how long? That depends. Just a few minutes a day will help you immensely, and you should do as many as possible. However, if your energy feels extremely depleted, just choose one exercise each day.

CALF RAISE

Lie on your back. In this position, you have two options:

Option #1:

1. Straighten your legs, without locking your knees.
2. Point your toes.
3. Pull your toes back, flexing your feet. Pulling your toes back is the most important part, as it stretches your calf muscles, which become exceedingly tight from lack of use. Hold this stretch for 15-30 seconds.
4. Repeat this cycle 10 times. (If you can only do it a few times, that's okay.)
5. Relax.

Option #2:

1. Bend your knees and raise your legs so they are perpendicular to your body.
2. Straighten your legs and point your toes.
3. Pull your toes back, flexing your feet. Hold this stretch for 15-30 seconds.

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4. Repeat steps #2-3 10 times. (If you can only do it a few times, that's okay.)
5. Lower your legs down to the bed and relax.

Your calves will get a greater stretch with your legs raised above your body—gravity helps in this one!

LEG PRESS

1. Bend your knees and raise your legs so they are perpendicular to your body.
2. Bring your knees down toward your underarms. Hold this position for 15-30 seconds to stretch your low back (which likely needs a good stretch).
3. Extend your legs back up above your body.
4. Repeat this cycle 10 times. (Even a few times will help you immensely if that's all you can manage.)
5. Lower your legs to the bed and relax.

LEG CURL

1. Lie on your stomach with your head turned so your cheek is on the bed.
2. Bring your heels toward your buttocks as far as possible, bending your knees to do so. Hold the position for 15-30 seconds.
3. Lower your legs to the starting point of #2.
4. Repeat steps #2-3 10 times. (Even a few times will suffice if that's all you can manage.)
5. Lower your legs back down to the bed and relax.

You may notice a deep stretch in your hip flexors (front thigh muscles). They, too, are probably exceedingly tight, and tight hip flexors can intensify low-back pain. So don't skip this one.

HAMSTRING STRETCH

1. Lie on your back.
2. Keeping one leg straight on the bed, raise the other one, keeping the knee straight.
3. Clasp your raised leg with your hands and pull it toward your head until it is approximately perpendicular to your body, or even further if possible. Hold the position for 15-30 seconds. (If you bend your knee at any point, that's fine—you will just get less stretch.)
4. Relax
5. Do the stretch with the other leg.
6. If you are up to it, repeat this process with both legs once more.

When you feel better and are capable of doing a few movements out of bed, try adding the three exercises below to your repertoire.

SQUAT

Don't get scared! You are already doing this if you are getting in and out of a chair. Essentially, however, you should try to do this move at least once a day, following these steps:

1. Hold onto your bathroom or kitchen counter using both hands.
2. Place your feet shoulder width apart (or wider) and turn the toes outward slightly.
3. Squat down as far as you can do so comfortably. You should aim to reach the point where your thighs are parallel to the floor, but if you can't get that low, it's okay—you will improve with practice. Never go lower than this point.
4. Rise up to the starting position.
5. Repeat this process 10 times. (Even a few times will suffice if that's all you can manage.)

PUSH-UP

Again, we aren't going to make it difficult. For this one, find a counter or another stable surface—the higher the surface, the easier this will be.

1. Stand about 3 feet from your bathroom or kitchen counter. The taller you are, the further back you will need to be.
2. Spread your feet apart, so they are wider than shoulder width.
3. Hold onto the counter with both hands wide apart—about 6-12 inches past your shoulders. You should now be in a standard “push-up” position.
4. Lower your body towards the counter as far as you can, but not so far that your body touches it.
5. Push yourself up again.
6. Repeat the push-up 10 times. (Even a few times will suffice if that's all you can manage.)
7. Stand up straight and relax.

Please note: If you can't lower your body all the way down to the surface, that's okay. With practice (and time), you will get better. And when you do, you may need to find a lower surface to increase the difficulty.

ROW

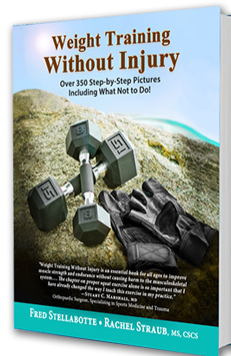
Anytime you are sitting up in a chair or standing, this is a great exercise to practice, particularly if your posture needs to improve.

1. Extend your arms straight out in front of you, shoulder-width apart, with your palms facing each other.
2. Pull your arms back as far as possible, bending your elbows as you do so. Hold the position for a few seconds. This will help bring your shoulders into proper alignment.

3. Return your arms to the starting position, straight out in front of you.
4. Repeat this process 10 times. (Even a few times will suffice if that's all you can manage.)
5. Relax.

Remember, if you are feeling unwell and incapable of a normal activity level, you can adapt just about any movement until you are feeling better and able to do more. Doing proper movements daily—even if you are in bed—will help you immensely. I promise!

For details on structuring a weight-training program (and much more), please refer to *Weight Training Without Injury: Over 350 Step-by-Step Pictures Including What Not to Do!*, a full-color manual that illustrates incorrect vs. correct technique for trainers, professionals, intermediates, and novices by Fred Stellabotte and Rachel Straub, MS, CSCS.



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