

Script – Print – Getting back on your feet

Whether it's a sore knee after a long day of walking, a back injury from lifting something heavy or recovery from a knee or hip replacement, injuries can throw off our normal routines.

The good news? Getting moving again may be an important part of the recovery process. "Most people would be surprised," says Crystal Whitmarsh, a physical therapist with OSF HealthCare. "We used to tell them to rest, ice, compress and elevate. But now we're finding that it's important to get moving sooner."

That doesn't mean jumping right back into your normal workout. Instead, Whitmarsh recommends a gradual return to activity. "Obviously, you don't want to jump into it too quickly, so you want to slowly transition back," she says. "But early motion is really proving to be helpful in recovering faster."

When returning to exercise after an injury or surgery, start with low-impact activities such as walking, biking or swimming.

Whitmarsh recommends beginning with early motion, or mobilization, and then gradually increasing activity. "You don't want to go in and progress intensity, resistance and repetitions all at once," she says. "Pick one thing and see how you respond. And then if that goes well the next day, then you might progress a little further."

For example, you might start at about 50% of your usual workout. If that goes well, increase the next workout to 60% and continue working your way up. How you move is just as important as how much you move. Proper form can help ensure you're using the right muscles and protecting your joints. But poor form can increase the risk of another injury.

"We want accurate muscle use and accurate timing of muscle use, and that helps to watch your form," Whitmarsh says. "We're not asking for perfection. That's impossible, but just making sure that you're protecting your joints as you move through the motion."

Some discomfort can be expected when you're getting back to exercise. But Whitmarsh says it's important to pay attention to what your body is telling you. "On that pain scale of zero to 10, I tell people if you're in the two to three range, I'm okay with that," she says. "If you start getting up to six, seven or eight, now that's our red stoplight."

Many people can gradually return to activity on their own. But there are times when working with a physical therapist can help, particularly after a serious injury or surgery.

Whitmarsh says physical therapy can be beneficial if you're trying to return to a higher level of activity but aren't sure how to get there. It can also help if you've tried to rehab on your own but need additional guidance. A physical therapist can help develop a plan that is suited for your injury, goals and activity level.

Exercise is only one part of the recovery process. Getting enough sleep, eating a nutritious diet and staying hydrated are also important. Protein can help support tissue healing. Ice may help with pain and swelling, while heat may be helpful in certain situations.

And if you overdo it during a workout, that doesn't necessarily mean you need to stop exercising altogether. "Just listen to your body," Whitmarsh says. "If you overdid it one day, now you're a little more swollen, maybe a little more pain. Back off, do an active rest day, and then move back into it the next day once things improve."

Whether the injury is big or small, setbacks can happen. The key, Whitmarsh says, is to recognize them, adjust and keep moving forward.

For more information on rehabilitation services, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).