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Avoid Injury When Returning to Exercise

The COVID-19 pandemic changed a lot, including our exercise habits. Between stay at home orders, gym closures and working from home, activity levels dropped. On top of all that, there were shortages of equipment like dumbbells and bicycles, making staying active difficult. But things look quite a bit different this summer. Vaccines are widely available, restrictions have loosened and people have been increasing activity this summer. But if you had a long break from activity, your body won't be ready to jump right back in. Here are a few tips to help you get more active without getting hurt:

Start slow

- If you're a runner, think about a walk to run program.
- If you're a weight lifter, start with lighter weights and less reps.
- Whatever your activity of choice is, start with short periods of activity and gradually work your way back up.

Warm up and cool down

A good warm up gets your heart and lungs ramped up and prepares your muscles and tendons for the increase in activity about to come. Include some light cardio like jogging, calisthenics, or cycling, followed by active stretching like marching, exaggerated stride walking, lunges, and lateral lunges.

Cooling down transitions your body back to a lower state of stress - it brings your heart rate and breathing down, decreases blood flow to your muscles and back to places like your digestive system, and helps you relax. It's also a great place for static stretches if you need some work on your flexibility.

Take a day off

Rest days let your body recover and keep you from getting burned out. Not enough exercise isn't good for you, but too much of a good thing can cause problems too.

Watch for early signs of injury

Some soreness for a few days after activity is normal, especially if you've had a long break. But there are a few common issues to watch out for as you return to activity:

- Swelling or bruising
- Joint pain, especially in the knees or shoulders
- Foot pain, which could be a sign of plantar fasciitis
- Muscle strains - these are particularly common in the hamstrings
- Sprains - most common in the ankle

Any of these issues justifies a call to your physical therapist. Getting checked out early can prevent an injury that derails your attempt to return to activity. Physical Therapists evaluate and treat painful muscle and joint problems on a regular basis and can help safely guide you back into a more active lifestyle.