

# Find your way back to the gym, but safely

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If the pandemic put your workout routine on ice, you're in good company.

Gym attendance plummeted last year, and as people slowly return, their bodies may be telling them, "Hey! It's been a while!" Even the likes of

action hero Will Smith acknowledged, "I'm in the worst shape of my life" before [posting a video poking fun](#) at how much he had forgotten about working out.

If you, like Smith, are plotting a fitness comeback, experts applaud you. But, they say, you need to be careful. Here's their advice on how to do that.

It starts with a vaccine.

The first step in a [safe return](#) to the gym is to remember what drove people away.

"Number one, get vaccinated," said Dr. Brandee Waite, director of sports medicine at UC Davis Health in Sacramento, California. That's especially important as coronavirus variants spread.

"If you're indoors, and exercising and breathing hard, and are not vaccinated, by all means please wear a mask to protect yourself and the community that you wanted to rejoin," she said.

Even fully vaccinated people should wear masks in public indoor settings in parts of the country with "substantial" or "high" transmission rates, according to updated guidance issued Tuesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Masking also is a good choice for vaccinated people at increased risk for severe COVID-19 or those with high-risk or unvaccinated family members.

The CDC offers guidelines for gyms. Waite suggested checking to make sure you know what your gym is doing and are comfortable with it—so an unwelcome surprise doesn't become an excuse for not returning.

## **Is it safe to work out after having COVID-19?**

For most people, yes, Waite said. It depends on lingering symptoms. Anyone who had COVID-19 should get clearance from their physician before returning to exercise. Some people also might want guidance from a physical therapist or a doctor who specializes in rehabilitation.

A team of British researchers, [writing in the journal \*BMJ\* in January](#), recommended waiting at least a week after symptoms clear and minimizing exertion for the first two weeks.

But overall, Waite said, "We want to get people back exercising, because we need their cardiovascular health to get better to improve their overall health."

Pace yourself.

Pandemic or no [pandemic](#), taking off for a long time and then trying to go right back to where you were "is definitely a way to get injured," said Bethany Barone Gibbs, an associate professor in the department of health and human development and clinical and translational science at the University of Pittsburgh.

And that injury is going to reduce how active you can be long-term. "So I would definitely recommend taking it slow."

Waite said her clinic has been swamped by people who rushed back into exercising at the same level as they did last year, then injured themselves. For people who are coming back to exercising, Waite's general rule is to do about half of what you were doing before you stopped.

"Not just half time, but maybe half of the intensity, and see where your body is. And then wait a full 48 hours before you tax it again, because sometimes you have delayed-onset muscle soreness."

To prevent injury, don't increase your effort more than 10% a week, Waite said. That goes for "your intensity, your time, your distance, whatever it is that you're doing per week. If you're trying to get there a little faster, maybe 10 to 20%."

No pain, no gain? Not necessarily.

If your goal is to become stronger, faster or win a race, you want to get to the point where you have muscle fatigue, or "the point where you feel a burn or feel a slight discomfort," Barone Gibbs said.

But if your main goal is simply to improve your cardiorespiratory health, reduce your risk of heart disease, maintain your weight and regulate your blood sugar and blood pressure, you don't need go that far.

"If your goal is just to be healthy, you don't necessarily need to be going to the gym and exercising until you throw up," she said. "Just walking for 30 minutes a day can really give you those benefits." [Federal physical activity guidelines](#) recommend 150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity or 75 minutes a week of vigorous aerobic activity, or a combination of both.

It's OK to push through soreness, Waite said. But pain is different. "True pain should stop you, because you're probably going to change your mechanics and then hurt yourself."

That's what lands people in her clinic, she said. Injured people say, "The coach was encouraging me," or they were close to an arbitrary performance goal and "I pushed through, even though my shoulder was starting to hurt."

So, listen to your body, Barone Gibbs said. "At the end of the day, exercise is supposed to make you feel good and better. And if it's not

making you feel good and better, you're overdoing it."

New groove? That's great.

If you've found something you like better than your pre-pandemic routine—go for it, Barone Gibbs said.

Waite agreed. "The best activity for you to do is the activity that you most enjoy." And it's probably good for your body to change things up.

Starting from scratch? You can do it.

"Everybody has to start somewhere," Waite said. "Wherever your starting point is, honor it as your valid starting point, and make a plan for smart progression."

Barone Gibbs recommends starting with as little as 10 minutes of brisk walking a day. "Try that a couple of times a week, and try to build up to that 150 minutes per week."

You don't have to start out with a marathon in mind, Waite said. "I'd rather people start small and have a steady plan for growth than start medium, get injured and then never [exercise](#) again."

Provided by American Heart Association

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