

Perioperative exercise programmes to promote physical activity in the medium to long term: systematic review and qualitative research

Michael W Pritchard,¹ Amy Robinson,¹
Sharon R Lewis,² Suse V Gibson,³ Antony Chuter,⁴
Robert Copeland,⁵ Euan Lawson⁶ and
Andrew F Smith^{7*}

¹Lancaster Patient Safety Research Unit, Royal Lancaster Infirmary, Lancaster, UK

²Bone and Joint Health, Blizard Institute, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK

³Department of Health and Care, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, UK

⁴Patient and public involvement representative, Sussex, UK

⁵Centre for Sport and Exercise Health, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK

⁶Lancaster Medical School, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

⁷Department of Anaesthesia, Royal Lancaster Infirmary, Lancaster, UK

*Corresponding author Andrew.Smith@mbht.nhs.uk

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

Encouraging people who need surgery to become more physically active in the longer term

Our question

We know that physical activity helps keep us all fit and healthy. Each year, lots of people speak to doctors and other health-care workers because they are having surgery. Is this an ideal opportunity to encourage people to be more physically active?

What we did

In October 2019, we searched for studies about physical activity programmes that encourage adults who are preparing for surgery, or who have recently had surgery, to be more active. This time frame around surgery is called the perioperative period.

Between November 2020 and January 2021, we also had group discussions and interviews [using Zoom (Zoom Video Communications, San Jose, CA, USA) because of COVID-19] with people who currently work in these kinds of services.

What we found

We found 53 studies, with 8604 adults, and 67 different services. Most interventions were started after surgery. Services gave education or advice about physical activity, helped people change their behaviour or attitudes towards activity, and/or provided one-to-one or group 'exercise' classes.

Overall, we found that people who used a service may be more physically active up to 12 months after surgery and may have a slightly better quality of life and less pain. Although we were unsure whether or not there were any harms, or how many people continued using the services, people generally felt positive about their experiences.

We also spoke to nine people from eight UK-based services. They told us that it was important to 'frame' the discussion about physical activity around what people enjoy or a goal that is important to them, to support people to understand how being more physically active can benefit them, and to listen and be kind. They also told us that everyone should have an equal chance to do physical activity, with the same access to good facilities, available outdoor spaces and digital technology.

Conclusions

Services given when people are planning, or have had, surgery may have overall benefits. They should role model the positive benefits of physical activity, be delivered by compassionate staff in local communities and ensure equal access for all.

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