

Exercising With a Hernia

The first thing to keep in mind is that once a weakness in the abdominal wall has allowed a hernia to develop, it will tend to enlarge. The patient will need to take very careful note of the precise size and form of the hernia, and if it shows any sign of increasing, then it will be essential to ease off whatever activity is likely to have been the cause of the change. One should ensure that as far as possible it is always supported, and avoid the temptation ever to allow stress on it unsupported "just this once". Ten seconds of that could mean ten years of problems.

The second principle is to understand what type of stress is likely to be harmful. In general terms, simple tension in the muscle which runs vertically down the front of the abdomen (the *rectus abdominis*) is not normally harmful, in the same way as if you stretch a piece of cloth with a hole in it, the hole tends to close up. I hesitate to suggest carrying out experiments on it, but if a colostomate without a hernia does situps, the muscle can actually be felt closing up round the stoma, and is therefore at its strongest in this condition.

The stress which is likely to do the damage is an increased pressure in the abdomen. This can be generated by holding the breath while carrying out any task. Holding the breath, (or technically, forcibly exhaling against a closed glottis), known as the Valsalva manoeuvre, has the effect of increasing the intra-abdominal pressure, and is just about the worst thing an ostomate, particularly one with a hernia, can do. I have aimed to get this message across in "Don't Hold Your Breath!" and the "Grunt Rule" - if it makes you grunt, don't do it!

There is nothing about a hernia which precludes a person from exercising, or participating in sport, **provided that** the existence of this weakness is respected. Some notes on different sporting activities follow.

Swimming

This subject is covered in some detail in the two documents on "Swimming After Abdominal Surgery", and if those recommendations are followed meticulously, one should be safe. Always remember, however, that it is the unexpected which could cause the problem, like an unduly vigorous reaction on colliding with another swimmer. Aim to think in terms of being a trifle ponderous in your actions: perhaps as though you were a suicide bomber who didn't want to explode prematurely!

Aerobics

By definition, aerobic exercise will be making use of the large muscles of the arms, legs, and chest, which in themselves should not present a problem. The function of the abdominal muscles, and the muscles of the lower back, will be to maintain the position of the body: they are known as the postural muscles, or fixators, because they hold the body in the position you want to do the exercise. Provided that the Grunt Rule is observed, there should be no problem, but do be aware that ballistic moves, like powerful kicks or punches, could cause more stress than is desirable.

Aqua Aerobics

Exercise in water has much in common with exercise on land, but there are two significant differences. The first is that it is much more difficult to maintain balance when working in water, as a consequence of the buffeting effect of water currents, and this can result in

greater loads on the postural muscles. The second is that, owing to the effect of buoyancy, the feet tend to slip on the pool floor, and one is not working from a stable base, which again places greater demands on the postural muscles.

If you are looking for an aqua aerobics class, not all aqua aerobics teachers are equal. If you have the opportunity, you might consider joining an Aquafit post-natal class, because the Aquafit Teacher certificate has to be regarded as the top qualification for water exercise, and the syllabus includes post-natal exercise. I don't know whether this might present a problem for males, but the law on sexual discrimination should be on your side! Otherwise, explain your circumstances to the teacher, who should be able to advise you on any exercises you should omit, or take gently. I taught and examined Aquafit teachers for twenty years, but I never got round to adding post-ostomy or post-hernia work!

Yoga

This is a difficult topic on which to pronounce, but to the extent that it teaches relaxation, it should be a good thing. I don't consider that the beginner poses should present any problems, and would not have thought that a gentle stretch could do any harm. The difficulty might come with some of the transitions between the poses, which might prove awkward, and this is where there could be a temptation to hold the breath. I would suggest analysing very carefully what is happening in the transitions, and if it appears that there is any danger of breaching the Grunt Rule, find another way to transition that is physically easier, even if it is less elegant. It might be useful to discuss this with the teacher.