Fontan, exercise and living a healthy lifestyle

This information is for young people with a Fontan circulation and their families.

Can I exercise? Should I exercise?
Most people with a Fontan circulation are encouraged to exercise to maintain physical fitness. Exercise helps to reduce the risk of obesity and other health problems. You should discuss with your cardiologist your own level of ability, including what type of exercise and level of effort is best for you, and what you enjoy doing. Your cardiologist may ask you to do an exercise stress test to understand how much exercise is safe for your heart.

It may be a good idea to visit with an exercise physiologist to develop an exercise program to help you keep active.

What is the benefit of exercise?
There are many benefits to exercising. These include;
- improving physical strength
- burning extra calories to maintain a healthy weight
- reducing levels of stress and anxiety
- increased energy and wellbeing
- feeling and looking great!

Did you know? In people with a Fontan circulation, exercise to maintain fitness and healthy muscles has been shown to improve heart function and exercise capacity.

When exercising, remember to:
- Wear sunscreen for all outdoor sporting activities.
- Drink plenty of water so you don’t become dehydrated.
- Take regular rest breaks.

If you start to feel unwell stop exercising and tell someone. If you participate in regular, organised sport you should develop a plan by talking to your coach about what should happen if you begin to feel unwell (eg. who should they call and what should they do).

Parents!
There are subsidies available through Medicare for people with chronic health conditions. Ask your GP about a Chronic Disease Management Plan.
Are there any sports I should avoid?
Some people with a Fontan circulation are on medication to prevent the formation of blood clots (eg; warfarin). The risk of bleeding during normal activities is very low. Unfortunately, most contact sports are best avoided if you are on blood thinners because you may get injured during play and have bleeding that is excessive.

If you wish to play competitive or contact sport or you have questions or want more information about this you should speak to your cardiologist.

Am I at risk of endocarditis?
Having good oral health is important for the prevention of bacterial heart infections, known as endocarditis. Many people who have a cardiac condition (including those with a Fontan circulation) have an increased risk of endocarditis due to the artificial material used during their heart surgeries. You can reduce the risk of endocarditis by regularly brushing your teeth, flossing, and seeing your dentist at least once a year. You should also check with your cardiologist about whether you need antibiotics before dental procedures.

What if I have a pacemaker or defibrillator?
Patients with pacemakers and/or defibrillators should discuss the type of exercise they wish to do with their cardiologist. In general the level and type of exercise you can do depends on the type of pacemaker or defibrillator you have. It is important to discuss your desired level of sporting activity with your cardiologist. Together you can work out a plan that means you can get all the benefits of exercise, safely.

How do I maintain a healthy weight?
As well as exercise, eating well will help you stay a healthy weight. Every day try to eat:
- a variety of vegetables including different colours and types (x5 serves per day)
- fruit (x2 serves per day)
- grains (mostly wholegrain) such as bread, rice, pasta, oats, polenta, couscous and quinoa
- protein such as lean meat and poultry, fish, eggs, nuts, seeds and beans
- dairy (mostly reduced fat) such as milk, cheese, and yoghurt

Limit your intake of:
- foods high in saturated fat such as biscuits, pastries, processed meats (eg. salami), pizza, fried foods, and chips.
- salt
- sugar (eg. swap out drinks high in sugar such as cordial, soft drink and sports drinks for water). For more information about healthy eating you can visit the Australian Guidelines on their website (listed below).

Remember
- Find an exercise you enjoy and do it regularly.
- You are entitled to the many benefits to exercise.
- There is support available to help you begin to exercise
- Check with your cardiologist about personal recommendations just for you
- Eating well and having good oral health is an important part of living a healthy lifestyle.

Helpful Websites: