

# “YOU CAN SEE SOMETHING CHANGE IN THEM.”

Thanks to donor support, the Exercise Medicine Program at SickKids is gaining strength.

**NOW AT THE END OF ITS SECOND YEAR**, the Exercise Medicine Program treats more than 100 patients—up from 40 in its first year. It’s a testament to both the need and value of the program, whose reach now extends beyond cardiac patients, to rheumatology, respiratory, oncology and endocrinology patients, who may not have thought they could tolerate exercise, let alone thrive.

Last year, the team, led by Dr. Barbara Cifra, launched a new telemedicine service, offering a remote monthly check-in for all patients (in between their scheduled hospital visits). Dr. Cifra asks about medical matters (symptoms during exercise, medication compliance), while the newly hired rehabilitation therapy assistant, Heather McFall, reviews their progress: have the exercises been difficult, are they getting easier, are they ready to progress to greater difficulty? Patients and families are also asked to send videos of themselves during exercise so the team can ensure proper posture and breathing. For families who come as far as Sault Ste. Marie or Ottawa, telemedicine has offered more contact and reassurance and, if their child is doing well, can sometimes negate the need for a face-to-face appointment.

Exercise rehab patients continue to thrive and even exceed expectations. For example, a heart patient named Alex (pictured top right) was born with a severe congenital heart defect, which required several open-heart surgeries to redirect blood flow to the lungs.

**“I FEEL HAPPIER TO KNOW I CAN DO MORE THINGS. I CAN GO MORE PLACES AND BE LESS TIRED.”**

**- EXERCISE MEDICINE PARTICIPANT**

Despite his limitations, he was bent on doing CrossFit (high-intensity interval training). His family thought it would be unwise and possibly dangerous. But after some baseline fitness and cardiopulmonary testing, Dr. Cifra figured out a way to tailor aspects of CrossFit to Alex’s unique needs. They replaced heavy lifting with lower weights and higher repetition to prevent blood pressure spikes. Alex excelled. He got stronger in all ways. “After 12 months we did a cardiopulmonary test and we thought the numbers were wrong,” says Dr. Cifra. “They were too good to be true.” She gets teary talking about another patient, a young girl with complex respiratory conditions (Francine, pictured below). “Now she’s doing taekwondo,” says Dr. Cifra. “She doesn’t need oxygen, she doesn’t need her walker.” Francine’s lung function improved so dramatically, her doctor was in total disbelief. Francine also brimmed with new confidence. “You can see something change in them,” says Dr. Cifra.

Thanks to donor support, the Exercise Medicine Program is fast becoming a hospital-wide platform for exercise rehab, for every kind of patient. For Dr. Cifra, the goal remains the same. “We want to make exercise joyful, something that gives kids confidence and the feeling of normality,” she says. “Because everybody can do something—even kids who are severely limited by their condition. They have to feel like they can do things.”



Exercise Medicine participants, top to bottom: Alex, Dante (both congenital heart defects) and Francine, a complex respiratory patient.

