

Physical Activity and Mental Health

Why bother with exercise?

- Exercise keeps our hearts and bodies healthy.
- We often talk about the mind and body as though they are completely separate – but they aren't. The mind can't function unless your body is working properly – but it also works the other way. The state of your mind affects your body.
- If you feel tired or depressed you tend to do less, then you eventually feel more tired or depressed and then do even less and miss out on the things that you used to enjoy.
- To work properly, your body needs regular exercise - and most of us feel good when we are active.
- Until the last 100 years or so, you had to be quite active to just live your everyday life. Now, in modern Western societies, so much of what we used to do is done by machines. We drive cars, so we walk less, vacuum cleaners make cleaning easy, and washing is done by a machine. At work we may not even have to move around in the office - it's enough to sit at the computer. It doesn't help that modern high-energy foods make us put on too much weight also.

Why does exercise work?

We are not yet exactly sure. There are several possibilities:

Most people in the world have always had to keep active to get food, water and shelter. This involves a moderate level of activity and seems to make us feel good. We may be built – or "hard wired" - to enjoy a certain amount of exercise. Harder exercise (perhaps needed to fight or flight from danger) seems to be linked to feelings of stress, perhaps because it is needed for escaping from danger.

- Exercise seems to have an effect on certain chemicals in the brain, like dopamine and serotonin. Brain cells use these chemicals to communicate with each other, so they affect your mood and thinking.
- Exercise can stimulate other chemicals in the brain called "brain derived neurotrophic factors". These help new brain cells to grow and develop. Moderate exercise seems to work better than vigorous exercise.
- Exercise seems to reduce harmful changes in the brain caused by stress.

How much exercise is enough for me?

- Firstly – any exercise is better than none.
- BUT a moderate level of exercise seems to work best.
- This is roughly equivalent to walking fast, but being able to talk to someone at the same time.
- You need to do about 30 minutes of moderate physical exercise on at least 5 days of every week. This can be done in one 30 minute session or broken up into shorter 10 or 15 minute sessions.
- This can not only lower the risk of heart disease, diabetes and cancer, but also seems to help depression – so you get a double benefit.
- Don't start suddenly - build more physical activity into your life gradually, in small steps.

When should I exercise?

As regularly as you can. There will be days when you just don't feel like exercise – you may feel tired or be too busy or anxious about something. If you keep to your routine and exercise at times like this you will almost certainly feel better.

If you are tired, exercise tends to give you energy. If you are worried, it can take your mind off your concerns for a while. Even if you can't 'exercise', a 15 minute walk can help you to clear your mind and relax. You may find it helpful to listen to music at the same time. Start by working out how much you do already – you can use a pedometer to show you how many steps you take every day. Or you could keep a diary for a few days of how long you spend doing active things. Then set yourself some goals.

How well does exercise help with depression?

- For mild depression, physical activity can be as good as antidepressants or psychological treatments like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).
- It can certainly be harder to get active when you are depressed. But being active lifts your mood and gives you a sense of being in control and in touch with other people.
- In some areas in the UK, GPs (family doctors) can prescribe exercise.
- If you are active you will probably find it easier to deal with life's problems and challenges.
- Exercise can also help you to cope better by improving how you feel about yourself and getting you together with other people.

Where can I go for advice and support?

E.ON's Active Energy Site on the portal or for information ring 0800 0511 468

Mental Health Foundation - A MHF report entitled 'Up and Running' focused on exercise as a way to treat depression

Walking the way to health - Tel: 01242 533337; email: whiinfo@naturalengland.org.uk

A nation-wide scheme of group walks backed by the British Heart Foundation and Natural England. The website offers information and support to all, from complete beginners to health/leisure professionals. The initiative supports over 400 local health walk schemes – find your nearest using the Walk Finder.

The Ramblers Association - Tel: 0207 339 8500; email: ramblers@ramblers.org.uk

Britain's biggest walking charity. Contact them to find out more about where to walk in your area, how to locate your nearest walking group and additional information about how to include children, walk in urban areas and advice for people with disabilities.

Occupational Health: Health Matters

Contact us by e-mail at [EUK.OH.One](mailto:EUK.OH.One@euk.com) or call 02476 182400