



## 'Use It or Lose It' – The Benefits of Exercise

Exercise has a large number of proven health benefits. Please tick the benefits which are important for you. This will help you choose the best forms of exercise and keep you motivated.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Improve fitness               | <input type="checkbox"/> Improve self esteem     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stabilise blood pressure      | <input type="checkbox"/> Improve flexibility     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Improve heart function        | <input type="checkbox"/> Maintain bone strength  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Have healthy immune system    | <input type="checkbox"/> Improve joint mobility  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Increase basal metabolic rate | <input type="checkbox"/> Improve muscle strength |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Decrease weight               | <input type="checkbox"/> Improve back stiffness  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Improve appearance            | <input type="checkbox"/> Improve sleep quality   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stabilise weight              | <input type="checkbox"/> Counteract depression   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Improve concentration         | <input type="checkbox"/> Counteract anxiety      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Improve mental focus          | <input type="checkbox"/> Counteract stress       |



Choose exercise targets for the following day

Type of exercise	Expected benefit	Expected problems

Choose exercise targets for the following week

Type of exercise	Expected benefit	Expected problems

Choose exercise targets for the following month

Type of exercise	Expected benefit	Expected problems

## Notes for GPs - Prescribing Exercise

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There are two main types of exercise: exercise that builds up the heart and lungs (such as running) and exercise that strengthens arms and legs (such as weight training)\*.

### How does it work?

There are many views on how exercise works. Exercise may block negative thoughts, or distract people from daily worries. If a person exercises with others, exercise may increase social contact. Depressed people generally have lower fitness levels than those who are not depressed which complicates the picture. Exercise may increase levels of neurotransmitters such as norepinephrine, dopamine and increase endorphins – increasing fitness may lift mood and improve mental focus.

### Is it effective?

Increased physical activity is associated with a reduced incidence of coronary heart disease, hypertension, non-insulin dependent diabetes mellitus, obesity, colon cancer, and depression and anxiety. In addition, increased physical activity increases bone mineral content, reduces the risk of osteoporotic fractures, helps to maintain appropriate body weight, and increases longevity. Graded exercise is now shown to improve chronic fatigue. Substantial evidence exists that lost fitness can be regained with regular physical activity, even in extreme old age.

There is evidence that physical exercise helps depression. Jogging, weightlifting, walking, stationary bicycling and resistance training (pushing or pulling weights with arms and legs) have all been found to be helpful. Exercise has been found to be more helpful than relaxation therapy, health education and light therapy. In older people, exercise has been found to be as helpful as antidepressant medication or social contact for some types of depression but the number of good studies in this area is small, and further work needs to be done (Bluepages.com – see below).

### Prescribing exercise

Exercise needs to be tailored to fit the physical and mental health of the individual patient. Different types of exercise yields different benefits; for example, strength training improves walking speed, tai chi and gymnastics assist balance, weights training aids depression and stress.

- **Make realistic goals:** Exercise recommendations should be made cautiously, with regard to physical health and depression type and severity. ‘Starting small’ will enable a sense of mastery. Patients with prominent self-blame can see exercise goals as another occasion for failure. Ask the patient to mark any activity undertaken on their daily mood chart. Explain that exercise is an adjunct to, not a substitute for, primary treatment.
- **Consider current lifestyle:** Patients who have been sedentary should start with a light exercise schedule: for example, a couple of stretches or a few minutes of walking each day. This is best outside in the morning light, if possible. Consider previous experience (eg, previous experience of exercise and usual coping styles).
- **Consider depression type:** If patients have a melancholic depression, exercise may need to be postponed until medication and psychotherapy begin to alleviate symptoms. However, they should still get out of bed and DO SOMETHING – they could manage one stretch or a very short walk!
- **Anticipate barriers:** Many common symptoms of depression (tiredness, lack of energy and concentration, psychomotor retardation, hopelessness and worthlessness) can promote barriers. Use motivational interviewing and problem solving techniques from the Psychological Tool Kit.
- **Accentuate the positive:** The specific choice of exercise should be guided by the patient's preferences and circumstances. The activity must be pleasurable and easily added to the patient's schedule. Draw attention to benefits (that patients have checked on their list and others).
- **Encourage social interaction:** Where appropriate, group activities (eg, exercise classes, walking groups) should be encouraged. Depressed patients who are isolated and withdrawn are likely to benefit from increased social involvement. The stimulation of being outdoors and in a pleasant setting may enhance mood, and exposure to light has been shown to be therapeutic in seasonal depression.

\* Some of the information about effectiveness of exercise in depression has been adapted from bluepages at <http://bluepages.anu.edu.au/whatworks.html>, which has further information and links.



## Useful References and Resources

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