



Exercise & depression

Move your body to improve your mental health and wellbeing



What this fact sheet covers:

- Regular exercise may alleviate symptoms of depression
- Role of exercise in treating depression
- Evidence for the benefits of exercise in managing depression
- Other benefits of exercise
- Exercise recommendations

Research suggests that regular exercise may increase the level of brain serotonin, a neurotransmitter involved in regulating mood, sleep, libido, appetite and other functions.

Problems in the serotonin pathways of the brain have been linked to depression. Exercise can also increase the level of endorphins in the brain which have mood-lifting properties.

Regular exercise may alleviate symptoms of depression by:

- Increasing energy levels
- Improving sleep
- Distracting from worries and rumination
- Providing social support and reducing loneliness if exercise is done with other people
- Increasing a sense of control and self-esteem, by allowing people to take an active role in their own wellbeing.

Key points about the role of exercise in treating depression

- Regular exercise can be an effective treatment by itself for non-melancholic depressions (particularly for people who were previously sedentary or inactive).
- Exercise does not need to be extremely vigorous to be helpful for depression – a brisk walk each day can be beneficial.
- For more severe melancholic depressions, exercise may be a helpful strategy alongside other treatments (e.g. medication or psychological therapies).
- For those with a melancholic depression and experiencing lack of energy in the morning, immediate exercise on getting out of bed can be beneficial.





Evidence for the benefits of exercise in managing depression

Regular exercise can be an effective way to relieve some forms of depression and is often a neglected strategy in the management of depression.

Numerous studies have shown that people who exercise regularly experience fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety than those who do not exercise regularly. Trials have also shown that regular exercise of moderate intensity can be an effective adjunctive treatment by itself for both melancholic and non-melancholic depression.

In fact, 16 weeks of regular exercise has been found to be equally effective as antidepressant medication in the treatment of mild to moderate depression. A recent study found that an increase of physical activity from inactive to three times a week resulted in a 20% decrease of the risk of depression over a five year period.

Both aerobic exercise (e.g. brisk walking, cycling or jogging) and resistance or strength training (e.g. weight-lifting) have been found to be helpful in treating depression.

Exercise recommendations

The National Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults and Older Australians recommends:

- A minimum of 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise on most, preferably all, days of the week; An example of 'moderate intensity' exercise is brisk walking where a slight increase in breathing and heart rate is noticeable.
- Exercising for at least 10 minutes at a time – the 30 minutes total does not need to be continuous; Short sessions of different activities can be combined to make up a total of 30 minutes exercise or more each day.
- Being active in as many ways as possible each day (e.g. using the stairs instead of a lift).



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