

# Depression & Exercise



## Depression and the sedentary lifestyle

American research into fatal heart attacks indicates that depression, exercise and physical health are closely linked. On average, depressed people only exercise about half as much as people who aren't depressed. This lack of cardiovascular fitness puts a depressed person at an increased risk of heart attack. It also seems that depression and exercise influence each other - a sedentary lifestyle increases the risk of depression, and depression increases the likelihood of a sedentary lifestyle.

## Exercise study

A research study at Duke University Medical Centre compared the effects of exercise and drug therapy in treating depression in older people. Three groups were used – medication treatment, exercise treatment and combination treatment. Results include:

- The participants of all groups improved.
- 68.8 per cent of participants in the combination group were no longer classified as clinically depressed after treatment.
- 60.4 per cent of participants in the exercise group were no longer classified as clinically depressed after treatment.
- 65.5 per cent in the medication group were no longer classified as clinically depressed after treatment.

## The brain chemical serotonin

Serotonin is an important brain chemical (neurotransmitter) that contributes to a range of functions, including sleep and wake cycles, libido, appetite and mood. Serotonin has been linked to depression. Queensland researchers have found that regular exercise, and the subsequent increase in physical fitness that results, alters serotonin levels in the brain and leads to improved mood and feelings of wellbeing. Some research indicates that regular exercise boosts body temperature, which may ease depression by influencing the brain chemicals.

## Other therapeutic benefits of exercise

Apart from changes in brain chemistry, the other factors that may help explain the therapeutic effect of exercise on depression include:

- The person experiences a self-esteem boost by taking an active role in their own recovery.
- Some forms of exercise, such as team sports, are also social events.
- Physical activity burns up stress chemicals, like adrenaline, which promotes a more relaxed state of mind.
- An enjoyable bout of exercise may be distracting enough to break the vicious cycle of pessimistic thinking.

Data Source:

1. Better Health Victoria
2. depressioNet
3. beyondblue

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## Physical benefits

The physical benefits of regular exercise include:

- Improved cardiovascular fitness
- Reduced risk of premature death
- Reduced cholesterol level
- Reduced blood pressure
- Maintenance of healthy weight
- Improved muscle tone.



## Exercise suggestions

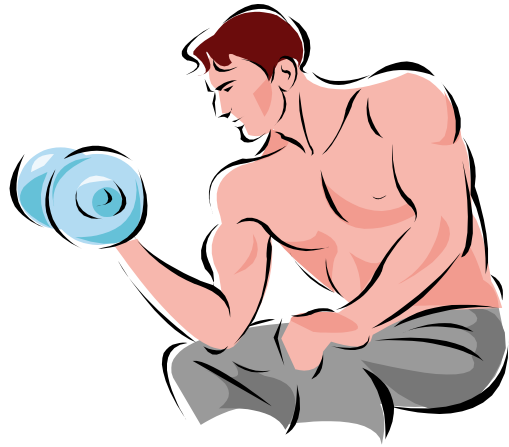
Before you decide on any exercise plan, consult with your doctor, especially if you haven't exercised for some time. Some ways you can use exercise to help manage depression include:

- Choose a range of fun activities.
- Ask a family member or friend to be an exercise partner, as lack of motivation is one of the key characteristics of depression.
- Exercise at least five times per week.
- Make the length of each exercise session at least 30 minutes.
- Exercise at around 60 to 70 per cent of your maximum heart rate. To calculate your maximum heart rate, subtract your age from 220.
- Remember to thoroughly warm up and cool down.
- Try to live a more active lifestyle - walk instead of using the car for short trips, or avoid the use of labour saving devices when possible.

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