

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Dr. Gohar Sheikh

The Latest Research on Exercise and Depression

A growing body of research shows that exercise is extremely effective in combating depression. And it's effective no matter who you are or how you exercise. Research results reveal that: 1) almost all types of exercise are equally effective and 2) exercise fights depression in all life stages — from childhood, to pregnancy, to old age.

Dr. Sheikh is concerned about the upswing in the use of medication for depression — drugs that have potentially dangerous side effects — and is, therefore, eager to share the latest research on exercise and depression with patients.



Dr. Sheikh is thrilled about these research results, which confirm what doctors of chiropractic have been advocating for years: exercise is an effective weapon against depression for sufferers of all ages.

Scholars estimate that clinical depression will affect about 7 percent to 18 percent of the population at least once in their lives (*Can J Psychiatry* 1997;42:367-77). According to the World Health Organization, depression is expected to become the second leading cause of disability worldwide (after heart disease) by 2020 (*Lancet*

1997;349:1498-1504).

Clearly, depression is a widespread and relentless disorder. Fortunately, regular exercise alleviates depression and anxiety without the need for potentially dangerous medication.

How Exercise Affects Depression

Evidence suggests that exercise improves depression symptoms because it:

- ☞ Positively affects the levels of certain mood-enhancing neurotransmitters in the brain.
- ☞ Boosts feel-good endorphins.
- ☞ Releases tension in muscles.
- ☞ Improves sleep.
- ☞ Reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol.
- ☞ Increases body temperature.
- ☞ Instills a sense of mastery and control in life.
- ☞ Bolsters self-esteem.
- ☞ Provides a distraction from worries.
- ☞ Rids built-up stress and frustration.

The Latest Research on Exercise and Depression

For years, doctors of chiropractic have been telling patients about research proving that exercise is highly effective in combating depression. For instance, a 2000 study published in the journal *Psychosomatic Medicine* found that exercise may even surpass antidepressants when it comes to preventing depression relapses over the long term (*Psychosom Med* 2000;62:633-8).

And late-breaking evidence continues to support exercise's effectiveness in alleviating depression. For example, a study published in September 2007 looked at 202 adults diagnosed with major depression. Researchers assigned the subjects to one of four groups: supervised exercise in a group setting, home-based exercise, antidepressant medication or placebo pill. The authors concluded that "the efficacy of exercise in patients seems generally comparable with patients receiving antidepressant medication." (*Psychosom Med* 2007;Epub.)

Another 2007 study investigated the short-term effects of exercise in patients with major depression. The study divided 38 subjects diagnosed with major depression into two groups: 1) exercise group (walking) or 2) placebo group (stretching and relaxation). After 10 days, the "reduction of depression scores in the exercise group was significantly larger than in the placebo group." The researchers concluded that "endurance exercise may help to achieve substantial improvement in the mood of selected patients with major depression in a short time." (*BR J Sports Med* 2007;41:29-33.)

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Using Exercise to Fight Depression During Pregnancy and Postpartum

New 2007 research also reveals that exercise may help fight depression or mood disorders during pregnancy and postpartum.

One recent study investigated the influence of a single bout of exercise on the mood of pregnant women participating in an aqua- or studio-based exercise class compared to a parentcraft [childbirth and infant care class] group and a control group.



The researchers concluded that “both modes of exercise appear to be equally beneficial for pregnant women to engage in to improve mood. Additionally, exercise, but not parentcraft classes, resulted in enhanced mood in women in their 2nd or 3rd trimester of pregnancy.” (*J Sports Med Phys Fitness* 2007;47:103-11.)

A 2007 literature review looked at the role of exercise in treating postpartum depression. The researchers conclude that “limited evidence supports a relationship between participation in exercise and reduction in postpartum depression. Given the reluctance by some women to use antidepressant medication postpartum and the limited availability of psychological therapies, exercise as a therapeutic possibility deserves further exploration.” (*J Midwifery Womens Health* 2007;52:56-62.)

Exercise and Childhood Depression

A number of studies have reported that up to 2.5 percent of children and up to 8.3 percent of adolescents in the US suffer from depression (*J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 1996;35:11:1427-39). In addition, research indicates that depression onset is occurring earlier in life today than in past decades (*JAMA* 1989;261:2229-35).

Fortunately, research reveals that children can also benefit from the powerful antidepressant effects of exercise.

A 2007 study published in the *International Journal of Emergency Mental Health* investigated the effects of aerobic exercise on childhood post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety. Fifteen participants, aged 14 to 17, who met criteria for PTSD, engaged in an aerobic exercise program for 40 minutes, three times per week, for eight weeks.

The researchers found that “the results of this study provided support for the positive effects of aerobic exercise on reducing PTSD, depression, and anxiety. Fewer participants met full criteria for PTSD after exercising.” (*Int J Emerg Ment Health* 2007;9:133.)

Exercise for Seniors With Depression

The National Institute of Mental Health considers depression in people age 65 and older to be a major public health problem.

But research continues to prove exercise’s effectiveness in battling depression among the elderly.

A 2007 study conducted in Sweden looked at 860 elderly subjects. The researchers found that the “inactive elderly had higher depression scores than more active individuals, both in terms of light and strenuous exercise. The continuously active group had lower depression scores than both continuously inactive individuals and individuals reporting a shift from activity to inactivity during the preceding year.” (*J Aging Phys Act* 2007;15:41-55.)

Tips for Starting an Exercise Program

When suffering from depression, getting up and exercising can seem like an impossible task. But it’s not impossible, and even a small amount of exercise can make a huge difference.

Here are some tips for getting started:

- ☞ Consult with your doctor of chiropractic, especially if you haven’t exercised for some time.
- ☞ Choose an activity you enjoy. No one form of exercise is better than another when it comes to easing depression. So if you can’t face a trip to the gym, don’t. Go for a walk with a friend, go swimming or try a yoga class.
- ☞ Start small. Just walk around the block the first day. Gradually increase the amount of time and level of difficulty.
- ☞ Ask a family member or friend to be an exercise partner. This will keep you motivated, plus increase contact with other people, which can also ease depression symptoms.
- ☞ Exercise two to five times per week for at least 30 minutes.
- ☞ Incorporate exercise into your daily routine — take the stairs, walk instead of using the car for short trips, etc.

Note: Abruptly discontinuing antidepressant medication may have hazardous side effects. Do not discontinue the use of any prescription medication without first consulting with the health-care provider who prescribed the medication or another qualified health-care professional.

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