

Depression Health Center

Want to learn more about exercise and depression? Many studies show that people who exercise regularly benefit with a positive boost in mood and lower rates of depression.

What Are the Psychological Benefits of Exercise With Depression?

Improved self-esteem is a key psychological benefit of regular physical activity. When you exercise, your body releases chemicals called endorphins. These endorphins interact with the receptors in your brain that reduce your perception of pain.

Endorphins also trigger a positive feeling in the body, similar to that of morphine. For example, the feeling that follows a run or workout is often described as "euphoric." That feeling, known as a "runner's high," can be accompanied by a positive and energizing outlook on life.

Endorphins act as analgesics, which means they diminish the perception of pain. They also act as sedatives. They are manufactured in your brain, spinal cord, and many other parts of your body and are released in response to brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. The neuron receptors endorphins bind to are the same ones that bind some pain medicines. However, unlike with morphine, the activation of these receptors by the body's endorphins does not lead to addiction or dependence.

Regular exercise has been proven to:

- Reduce stress
- Ward off anxiety and feelings of depression
- Boost self-esteem
- Improve sleep

Exercise also has these added health benefits:

- It strengthens your heart.
- It increases energy levels.
- It lowers blood pressure.
- It improves muscle tone and strength.
- It strengthens and builds bones.
- It helps reduce body fat.
- It makes you look fit and healthy.

Is Exercise a Treatment for Clinical Depression?

Research has shown that exercise is an effective but often underused treatment for mild to moderate depression.

Are there Types of Exercises That Are Better for Depression?

It appears that any form of exercise can help depression. Some examples of moderate exercise include:

- Biking
- Dancing
- Gardening
- Golf (walking instead of using the cart)
- Housework, especially sweeping, mopping, or vacuuming

- Jogging at a moderate pace
- Low-impact aerobics
- Playing tennis
- Swimming
- Walking
- Yard work, especially mowing or raking
- Yoga

Because strong social support is important for those with depression, joining a group exercise class may be beneficial. Or you can exercise with a close friend or your partner. In doing so, you will benefit from the physical activity and emotional comfort, knowing that others are supportive of you.

Should I Talk to my Doctor Before Exercising?

For most people, it is OK to start an exercise program without checking with a health care provider. However, if you have not exercised in a while, are over age 50, or have a medical condition such as diabetes or heart disease, contact your health care provider before starting an exercise program.

How Can I Decide What Types of Exercise to Do?

Before you begin an exercise program for depression, here are some questions you should consider:

- What physical activities do I enjoy?
- Do I prefer group or individual activities?
- What programs best fit my schedule?
- Do I have physical conditions that limit my choice of exercise?
- What goals do I have in mind? (For example: weight loss, strengthening muscles, improving flexibility, or mood enhancement)

How Often Should I Exercise to Ease Depression?

Try to exercise at least 20 to 30 minutes, three times a week. Studies indicate that exercising four or five times a week is even better. Take it easy if you are just beginning. Start exercising for 20 minutes. Then you can build up to 30 minutes.