

Health and Exercise

How can healthy eating and exercise benefit your recovery?

Now that you've been through treatment for addiction to alcohol or other drugs, you're learning to protect your environment, stay away from triggers, and work the Twelve Steps to address emotional and spiritual issues. Right now your focus is on staying clean and sober, going to meetings, and working the Steps. But as you progress in recovery, you'll want to focus more and more on improving your physical health. Nutritional therapy and exercise can help you heal your body and rebalance your brain chemistry, making you feel better, which will reduce your risk of relapse or an eventual return to use.

How does addiction cause imbalances in your body?

Different drugs of abuse damage our bodies differently. Opiates (codeine, heroin, and morphine) affect the gastrointestinal system, causing constipation. Using stimulants (such as crack, cocaine, and methamphetamine) leads to decreased appetite, weight loss, and malnutrition. Users may stay awake for days, causing dehydration and electrolyte imbalances. Marijuana use can increase appetite, and long-term users may suffer from obesity.

Alcoholism causes deficiencies in vitamin B6, thiamine, and folic acid, resulting in anemia (low blood count) and neurological problems. Alcohol intoxication impairs the liver and the pancreas, causing an imbalance of fluids, calories, and electrolytes. Excessive alcohol use can also result in permanent liver damage, seizures, diabetes, and severe malnutrition.

In addition, alcoholics and drug addicts, especially those with eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, often suffer from a lack of vital amino acids and other vitamins and nutrients. This can cause deficiencies in important brain neurotransmitters that govern mood and emotion.

What can you do to improve your health?

Create a healthy diet

To develop healthy eating patterns, focus on a low-fat diet that includes protein, complex carbohydrates, and dietary fiber. A balanced diet consists of foods from these groups:

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Nuts and legumes

This group includes peas, beans, lentils, peanuts, walnuts, and almonds. Small, moderate servings of these foods help reduce the risk of cardiac problems, strokes, and diabetes.

Fish, poultry, and eggs

These foods provide protein, less saturated fat, and more unsaturated fat than red meat does. Studies have shown that people who replace red meat with chicken and fish have a lower risk of heart disease and colon cancer. Eggs are high in cholesterol, but consumption of up to one a day does not appear to have adverse effects on heart disease risk (except among diabetics). They do slightly raise cholesterol levels but provide other nutritional benefits.

Dairy or calcium supplement group

Foods in this group, which include milk, yogurt, hard cheese, cheese spread, and cottage cheese, are rich in calcium, protein, and vitamins. Companies often enrich or fortify milk by adding other vitamins as well.

Recovery Action Step

1. Write down what you eat in a typical day.
2. If you don't eat a balanced diet of foods from the groups above, write down how you can change your eating habits to include some of these foods.

Supplements and proper hydration often play a key role in healthy eating as well. If irregular eating habits have caused you to be deficient in certain vitamins, taking supplements such as B complex, zinc, and vitamins A and C will help. Dehydration is also a common problem during recovery. Make sure you drink enough fluids. A minimum of forty-eight to sixty-four ounces of water per day is recommended.

See the following for additional ways to maintain a healthy, balanced diet:

Lower your saturated fat

Red meat includes beef, pork, and lamb. Both red meat and butter contain saturated fat, which raises cholesterol levels in the blood and raises the risk of heart disease. To reduce the risk of these problems, eat lean (low-fat) red meat sparingly.

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Lower your refined carbohydrates

A diet high in refined carbohydrates (including white bread and white rice) can really raise the levels of sugar in your body and cause medical problems. Also, a diet high in starch (including potatoes and pasta) is associated with diabetes and heart disease. Overall, white rice, white bread, potatoes, pasta, and foods with sugar do not provide much nutritional value and should be used sparingly.

Eat on a regular schedule

As active addicts, we often forgot what it was like to be hungry. Instead we interpreted this signal as a drug craving. If you feel strong drug cravings now, you might just be hungry. Eating on a regular schedule will help prevent cravings induced by hunger.

Engage in physical recreation

Together with healthy eating, physical recreation can help you improve your overall well-being. So go ahead and make physical activity a part of your everyday life. It can help you feel better and improve your health. There are many fun things you can do to be active by yourself or with family or friends. Find recreational activities you enjoy. Go for brisk walks, ride a bike, or work in the garden. Identify a mix of activities that will keep you moving and active. If you are not used to being active, start out slowly and work up to thirty minutes a day. Add more activities for longer periods of time as you begin to feel more fit, or add some vigorous activity.

Physical activity can

- make you feel more energetic
- help you sleep better
- lower your chance for relapse or an eventual return to use
- improve your mood and decrease depression
- lower your blood pressure
- improve your blood cholesterol levels

Always consult your doctor before beginning a new exercise or fitness plan. Build up your activities slowly. Doing too much too soon could hurt you in early

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recovery, especially if you have not been active. Following are some tips for exercising:

1. Engage in thirty minutes of activity a day that makes you breathe harder than you normally do.
2. Use your muscles regularly. Find activities that strengthen and tone your body. For example, take a fitness class, swim, run, or lift weights.
3. Get involved in sports or activities that improve your balance, such as yoga, Pilates, dance, martial arts, or other sports.
4. Make sure you stretch before and after physical activity.