



Exercise for physical, mental fitness

March is "Nutrition" Month. But eating a nutritious diet is only one half of the formula to good health. Exercise, as you probably guessed, is the other half of this successful formula.

We tend to focus on the physical health benefits of exercise, but the mental health benefits are impressive as well.

The report from the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports Research Digest (December 1997) indicates that exercise can have positive biochemical effects on the brain in addition to positive biochemical effects on the rest of the body.

A substantial body of research supports claims that exercise can help relieve the symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Anxiety is clinically defined as a form of negative self-assessment that results in worry, self-doubt, and apprehension.

In the United States, about 7 percent of the adult population requires some form of treatment for an anxiety disorder. In addition to this, many otherwise healthy people experience anxiety related to various types of stress in their everyday lives.

Exercise is most likely to reduce anxiety symptoms when it is aerobic, that is jogging, cycling, swimming and brisk walking.

With several weeks of regular exercise, significant improvements have been reported. The more unfit you are and the greater your anxiety, the more likely you will benefit from exercise.

Although all of us feel "down" now and then, clinical depression is characterized by feelings of hopelessness and a sense of defeat. People suffering from depression feel "down" even when there is no apparent reason and are depressed much of the time rather than just now and then. Serious clinical depression, requiring treatment, affects from 2 to 5 percent of all Americans.

With regular exercise several times a week, studies show a significant reduction in depression. Those who are most depressed seem to get the benefit, and the more vigorous the exercise, the greater the benefits.

One especially encouraging observation of many studies is that exercise programs can be as effective in treating anxiety disorders and depression as other common treatments, such as relaxation training, medication and psychotherapy. This doesn't mean swapping your professional treatment for a pair of running shoes. But taking up a regular exercise program is likely to enhance the effects of other therapies.

Research is being done to see if individuals on antidepressant medication can systematically lower their drugs while supplementing their treatment with regular exercise. The research seems promising. Certainly, exercise is more cost effective than most other therapies and, in addition, it clearly health benefits for the whole body.

Will exercise mentally benefit those who are not anxious or depressed? For most individuals, research indicates that the answer is yes. Exercise (aerobic fitness) improves self-esteem in both adults and children and especially in handicapped children.

Sleep can be enhanced by exercise. When people exercise, they tend to fall asleep quicker, sleep more soundly and their uninterrupted sleep is longer. Older females with lower levels of fitness seem to benefit the most from incorporating exercise into their lives. Because exercise tends to energize many individuals, completing exercise earlier in the day is generally most effective.

Americans take nutrient supplements to make up for our "less-than-perfect" eating patterns. If exercise came in a pill, everyone would be taking it. But it doesn't – so keep moving! And remember to see your doctor before starting a new exercise program.

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