

Exercise Walk

The type of exercise that helps the brain is easier than you might think

They say that exercise is one of the best things you can do for your brain, particularly if you have trouble with depression, memory, or sleep. Exercise literally heals the brain. Substances involved in brain repair – like BDNF – rise in the bloodstream. A few weeks later, the mood benefits are similar to those for antidepressants and the memory improvement is more than that of any medication.

Surprisingly, the amount of exercise you need to see these benefits is a lot less intimidating than a gym membership. It is:

30-45 minutes of brisk walking every other day.

The walk should be brisk enough to raise your heart rate and get you breathing faster. Any activity that achieves that effect (called “aerobic”) can be substituted, such as swimming, bicycling, basketball, or dancing. You can even break it down into three 15 minute chunks.

More isn't always better

In terms of brain function, only 1 in 12 people get greater benefits from a more intense routine.

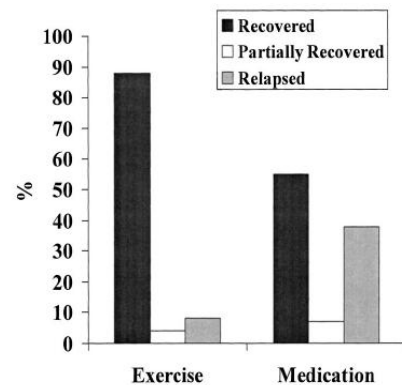
The best prevention

Over 100 clinical studies support the brain benefits of exercise. Exercise works as well as an antidepressant, and can double the rate of response to antidepressants when used together. When it comes to prevention, it may work even better than an antidepressant.

In a study at Duke, people who recovered through exercise did just as well as those who



took an antidepressant. However, six months later 38% of those who were on the antidepressant had gone back into depression, while only 8% of those who had recovered through exercise relapsed:



When should I exercise?

To deepen sleep, exercise in the late afternoon. If you have bipolar disorder, exercise at regular times each day, as a daily routine can help keep stabilize mood.

Other benefits

In terms of mental health, exercise also helps anxiety, panic, chronic fatigue, and smoking cessation. It also prevents dementia.

Its physical benefits are so numerous that *Scientific American* ranked walking first among the lifestyle factors that can enhance longevity.

Here's just a few of aspects of health that improve with walking:

- Strengthens bones
- Slows aging and adds 3-7 years to the lifespan
- Lowers stroke risk
- Improves heart and lung health
- Relieves arthritis and joint inflammation
- Builds muscles
- Weight loss
- Deepens sleep quality
- Reduces pain by lowering endorphins
- Improves memory and prevents dementia
- Lowers cancer risk
- Lowers blood pressure, cholesterol and lipids
- Prevents diabetes

Playful Aerobics

"I have to exercise in the morning before my brain figures out what I'm doing."

—Marsha Doble

If that sounds like you, try weaving exercise into your everyday routines before your brain catches on. Some ideas:

Swimming

Hike in nature

Put on audio books or music

Dance

Place the treadmill in front of the TV: you can only watch that show if you're on it. Or strap a tablet to your treadmill.

Join a kickball or softball league

Turn business meetings into walking meetings

Jumping jacks

Play a very active video game (*Wii tennis, Wii fit, Just Dance*)

Shoot hoops

Roughhouse with your kids

Roughhouse with your dog

Roller or ice-skating

Wash the car

Belly dancing

Sign up for an adult gymnastics class

Use a standing desk

Park far away

Play tag with kids

Rowing

Do your shopping and errands by foot

Choose an active volunteer job, like Habitat for Humanity

Explore a new area

Jump rope or hula hoop

Walk the dog, or someone else's dog, or volunteer at an animal shelter to walk a dog

Join a martial arts class

Aerobic cleaning (scrub, vacuum, sweep, mop, rake)

Bike to work

—Chris Aiken, M.D., updated 1/6/2017