

Exercise twice as effective as anti-depressants

Researchers find walking or jogging is best way to improve symptoms

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Exercise is twice as [effective at treating depression](#) as antidepressants, a study has suggested.

[Walking or jogging](#) at least two to three times a week was considered the best way to improve symptoms of depression, researchers revealed.

Experts analysed 14,170 people with major depression disorder from 218 separate trials and

ranked different forms of exercise by how effective they were at treating the condition compared with existing treatments.

While all forms of intervention were effective to some degree, taking antidepressants known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) – the most commonly prescribed type – on their own was less effective than either exercise or therapy, the study found.

Taking just antidepressants improved a person's symptoms by 26 per cent, the study found, while just walking or jogging improved symptoms by 63 per cent.

Researchers found that “the benefits from exercise tended to be proportional to the intensity” and that the more vigorous the exercise, the better.

Swap repeat prescriptions for art

A record 8.6 million people in England were prescribed antidepressants in 2022-23, while as many as one in six people have symptoms of moderate or severe depression, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

The NHS issued national guidance to GPs last year urging them to stop writing repeat prescriptions for those who have become dependent on common medications, including antidepressants, in favour of activities like art, music and gardening classes.

Exercise is also being [prescribed by doctors](#), with the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, the NHS drug watchdog, recommending group exercise sessions at least once a week for 10 weeks with a trained practitioner.

The study, led by researchers at the University of Queensland, Australia, also found that yoga was as effective as cognitive behavioural therapy, both of which produced a “moderate” improvement in symptoms of around 55 per cent.

Researchers also found that dance was a very effective treatment but could not make broad sweeping claims about its benefits as the trials recruited an overwhelming number of young women.

Cycling, strength training and tai chi, all scored [better than antidepressants alone](#), although not as high as other forms of exercise.

Results did not differ among people with other underlying health conditions or by their varying severity of depression.

Yoga more effective for men

While walking and jogging were effective for both men and women, the study found that strength training was more effective for women and younger people, and yoga more effective for men and older people.

Dr Michael Noetel, the lead author, said it was the largest study to date to assess the effectiveness of exercise on depression.

The paper states: “Exercise may therefore be considered a viable alternative to drug treatment. We also found evidence that exercise increases the effects of SSRIs, so offering exercise may act as an adjuvant for those already taking drugs.”