EXERCISE BENEFITS YOUR BODY AND MIND

Are you contemplating joining a gym or walking club or perhaps starting a new sport? Most of us associate exercise with a healthy body and the desire to lose weight and improve our fitness levels, but it can be just as beneficial for a healthy mind.

Numerous studies have been done on the benefits of exercise, both physical and psychological. Exercise can reduce your risk of developing chronic diseases, improve your mood, boost mental prowess and help you cope better with stress.

Physical benefits

Exercise reduces risk for some chronic diseases

Regular exercise lowers your risk for developing heart disease, type 2 diabetes, stroke, high blood pressure and some cancers. Exercise can also reduce low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol that can lead to a build-up of plaque in the arteries, causing them to harden and narrow with time.

Exercise increases levels of good high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol. If you have a chronic disease like diabetes, arthritis or heart disease, exercise can be beneficial in helping to control your condition. Always speak to your doctor before starting any exercise programme.

Exercise aids weight loss or weight maintenance

The food we eat provides the energy our bodies need to function. If we eat less than the required energy for the day, we lose weight. If we eat too much, we gain weight. Exercise burns additional kilojoules and will help you to burn fat faster on your weight loss journey. Once you reach your goal weight, exercise will help to keep the weight off.

Exercise strengthens core muscles

You use your core muscles for most of your daily activities. Strengthening these muscles can help reduce back pain and improve posture, especially if you sit for long periods at a desk. Core exercises are designed to target your abdominal muscles and muscles in your back, hips and pelvic floor.

Exercise can boost mental prowess

Research has found that regular exercise, especially cardiovascular training, can help improve brain power. Exercise boosts the flow of oxygen to the brain, providing it with additional nutrients for optimal functioning. The hormones released during exercise can also help to boost memory and cognitive functioning. Studies now suggest that exercise may prevent or delay the onset of dementia.

Psychological benefits

Exercise can lift your mood

During exercise your body releases brain chemicals called endorphins or neurotransmitters into your blood steam. Your body's natural anti-depressants: dopamine, endorphins, norepinephrine and serotonin are all released during exercise and trigger positive feelings that help to improve your mood.

Exercise can improve self-esteem

When you start to feel both the physical and psychology benefits of exercise, you are likely to be motivated to carry on with your routine. Improved fitness, energy levels and weight loss can boost your self-esteem, helping you to develop a stronger self-image and more confidence.

Exercise beats stress

Exercise can help to relieve stress with the release of endorphins and a reduction in the levels of stress hormones like cortisol and adrenalin. Exercise can also get your mind off issues that may be causing you anxiety.

Types of exercise

Exercise falls into four main categories, each working your muscles in different ways. In order to achieve the maximum health benefits, you should do exercise in all these categories.

Endurance exercises improve fitness and burn fat

Aerobic exercises are those that target the heart, lungs and circulatory system. As you exercise, your heart rate increases and your lungs work harder. Exercises in this category include swimming, walking, jogging, dancing or cycling.

Strength exercises build muscle power

Anaerobic exercises can help to strengthen your body to cope better with daily activities. They include all weight lifting exercises, exercise with resistance bands, crunches, push-ups and squats.

Flexibility exercises stretch the muscles

Improved flexibility is beneficial in all spheres of your life – from exercise and sport to your general daily activities. Stretching improves muscle flexibility and helps achieve a better range of motion in muscles and joints. This can help to prevent injuries. All stretch exercises fall into this category, as well as programmes that improve flexibility, like yoga and Pilates.

Balance exercises help to stabilise the body

Balance exercises are advocated for seniors, to assist in stabilising the body and helping to prevent falls. They are also beneficial for pregnant women as pregnancy can alter your centre of gravity. Balance and co-ordination exercises are essential during early childhood development.

How much exercise do you need?

If you don't currently exercise, just increasing your physical activity to about 20 minutes per day can have a positive impact on your health. Learn to build exercise into your day - take a walk at lunch time, take the stairs, park your car further away and walk, do some gardening or ride an exercise bike as you watch TV.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends that adults (18 to 64 years of age) should be doing 150 minutes of moderate aerobic exercise or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity per week. For additional health benefits, moderate workouts can be increased to 300 minutes and vigorous workouts to 150 minutes per week. Muscle strengthening activities (involving major muscle groups) should be done on two or more days per week.

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