

## Get active!

### What are the benefits?

Physical activity has a wide range of health benefits – for your mind as well as your body.

### •physical health benefits      •mental health benefits      •social and emotional benefits

#### Physical health benefits

As well as improving your overall physical fitness, being more active can have the following physical benefits:

- Reduced risk of some diseases. For example, health experts suggest that being more active can reduce your risk of developing a stroke or heart disease by 10%, and type 2 diabetes by 30–40%.
- Reduced risk of physical health problems as our bodies adapt to stress. As we become fitter, our bodies can better regulate our cortisol levels. Cortisol is a 'stress hormone' that our bodies release in response to anxiety; over prolonged periods, higher cortisol levels have been linked to a wide range of health problems including heart disease, high blood pressure, a lowered immune response, as well as depression and anxiety.
- Healthier organs. When you're active your body is working more, which is good for your organs. For example, a stronger heart will help you have lower cholesterol and lower blood pressure.
- Healthier bones. Weight-bearing exercises will strengthen your bones and build your muscle, which can reduce your chances of developing osteoporosis.
- Healthier weight. If you're overweight, becoming more active can help you start to reduce body fat as your stamina and fitness levels improve.
- More energy. As your body adapts to increased activity levels you get a natural energy boost, which can make you feel less tired. Researchers say that even low intensity levels of activity can be beneficial if you usually feel very fatigued.
- Improved sleep. Many people find they are able to sleep better at night after having been more active during the day.

#### Increasing your body's tolerance to stress

Exercise itself is a stressor, i.e. something that makes your body produce the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline. Making yourself experience stress on purpose by doing regular exercise forces your body to adapt as it becomes more active, so you build up a resilience over time. But it's important to pace yourself and not work your body too hard, because experiencing stress like this could become harmful over prolonged periods.

## Mental health benefits

- Reduced anxiety and happier moods. When you exercise, your brain chemistry changes through the release of endorphins (sometimes called 'feel good' hormones), which can calm anxiety and lift your mood.
- Reduced feelings of stress. You may experience reductions in feelings of stress and tension as your body is better able to control cortisol levels.
- Clearer thinking. Some people find that exercise helps to break up racing thoughts. As your body tires so does your mind, leaving you calmer and better able to think clearly.
- A greater sense of calm. Simply taking time out to exercise can give you space to think things over and help your mind feel calmer.
- Increased self-esteem. When you start to see your fitness levels increase and your body improve, it can give your self-esteem a big boost. The sense of achievement you get from learning new skills and achieving your goals can also help you feel better about yourself and lift your mood. Improved self-esteem also has a protective effect that increases life satisfaction and can make you more resilient to feeling stressed.
- Reduced risk of depression. If you're more active there's good evidence to suggest that at most ages, for both men and women, there's a trend towards lower rates of depression. In fact one study has found that by increasing your activity levels from doing nothing to exercising at least three times a week, you can reduce your risk of depression by almost 20%.

## Exercise as a treatment for depression

If you have a diagnosis of mild to moderate depression, your GP might suggest you do some exercise to help lift your mood. This is because regular exercise can be more effective at treating mild to moderate depression than taking antidepressants. Your GP might even give you a prescription for exercise, and refer you to a specific programme at a local gym or health centre.

In exercise treatment programmes the sessions usually last from 45 minutes to 1 hour, and you'd be invited to attend at least three times a week over a 10–14 week period. This is because exercise is thought to be most effective if you're able to manage the equivalent of five 30-minute sessions of moderate intensity activity each week (the same as the current NHS guidelines for healthy physical activity). It's also more likely to work for you if you choose exercise that you find enjoyable and that gives you a sense of accomplishment.

## Social and emotional benefits

- Making friends and connecting with people. Being around other people is good for our mental health and social networks – plus you can maximise the benefits of exercising by doing it with other people. You may find that the social benefits are just as important as the physical ones.
- Having fun. Lots of us enjoy being active because it's fun. Researchers have shown that there's a link between the things we enjoy doing and improvements in our wellbeing overall. If you enjoy an activity you're also more likely to keep doing it.
- Challenging stigma and discrimination. Some people find that joining a sport programme helps reduce the stigma attached to their mental health problem. Getting involved in local projects with other people who share a common interest can be a great way to break down barriers and challenge discrimination.

### Which activity is best for me?

Having a clear idea about what you want to achieve should help you to make a decision about which activity to choose. For example, you could think about which of these factors are most important for you:

- meeting new people and making friends
- learning a new skill
- managing your weight
- making your lifestyle more active
- improving your physical fitness
- giving your mental health a boost
- playing a team sport or exercising on your own
- being in an outdoor or indoor space
- ease of access – for example if you have limited physical mobility, or can't afford certain classes or equipment
- doing something you enjoy

