

Getting active

+ YOUNG PEOPLE



Being active helps maintain your health. We tend to think that the mind and body are separate, but what you do with your body can have a powerful effect on your mental health. And it's easier to feel good about life if your body feels good.

As well as reducing the risk of physical health problems, like heart disease and diabetes, some of the potential benefits of being active are:

- less tension, stress and tiredness
- a natural energy boost
- improved sleep or sleep patterns
- a sense of achievement
- less anger, irritability or frustration
- meeting other people at gyms, clubs, etc.

Physical activity leads to chemical changes in the brain, which can improve your mood and lower anxiety. Being active may also lead to changes in how you view yourself and can reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Being active and mental health

Being active is important for everyone. It can be hard, though, if you or someone you know is experiencing mental health difficulties. Evidence shows that getting active isn't only great for physical health and fitness, but also can positively influence mental health.

Symptoms

Symptoms of some mental health difficulties include lower energy, problems with motivation, loss of enjoyment in activities, and problems with sleep. These symptoms can really get in the way of staying fit and healthy.

Regular exercise can boost your self-esteem and help you concentrate, sleep, feel and look better. Physical exercise, in conjunction with psychological therapy and medications, is an established treatment for depression and is effective for anxiety.

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Treatments and medications

Some treatments for mental ill-health may effect energy levels. Exercise can help improve functioning and physical health, prevent recurrences, and manage the side effects of some of these medications or treatments. Exercise is one way to ease the symptoms of psychosis, such as blunted emotions, loss of drive and thinking difficulties – it is, though, less helpful for delusions and hallucinations.

For some mental health difficulties, exercise is actually part of the problem. Excessive exercise for someone who has an eating disorder can be harmful. And increased exercise can sometimes be an early warning sign of a manic phase for those with bipolar disorder.

Before starting to exercise, speaking to a GP about a pre-existing medical concern can help find the best kind of exercise

Some things to think about

Regardless of mental health, everyone should be aware of the other factors that play into exercise. Here are some of the key things to keep in mind.

Other medical conditions

Be careful if you have another medical condition. New exercise can effect that condition, like making asthma worse. Before starting to exercise, speaking to a GP about a pre-existing medical concern can help find the best kind of exercise.

Young people who smoke will generally be more puffed out when first starting physical activity. It's important to keep at it – in only a few weeks the puffed-out feeling will get less and less.

Be practical

Plan exercise around a budget and support system. Is travel required to a sports centre? Who could take you, or how would you get there otherwise (car, public transport)? How much does the activity cost? Can someone do it with you? Does the activity require special equipment?

Get some support

Starting a new sport, joining a new gym or trying exercise for the first time can be a little intimidating. To help with nerves, have a chat to some friends, family and other supports who can help with ideas, encouragement, and motivation.

Tips to help you get active

Start small

Some activity is better than none. It's as simple as walking or riding somewhere instead of driving. Or, if you take public transport, getting off one stop before your usual stop and walking the rest of the way. You can even take the stairs instead of the escalator or lift.

Make a plan

Planning a routine can help you become more active. Make sure some form of exercise is included each day. Try to stick to the plan as closely as possible, but be flexible because sometimes things comes up.

Choose something you'll enjoy

... or at least something you won't hate! Don't go to the gym if you've never liked the gym. Instead, try walking, riding a bike to a friend's place, throwing a Frisbee, or playing footy at the park with some mates.

Choose a time of the day or week that works for you

Everybody is motivated at different times – morning, afternoon or evening. Just be careful about exercising too late in the evening because you may have problems getting to sleep.

Gradually build up physical activity

Increase the amount of time you exercise in a day, or the number of days in a week that you're exercising. Aim for 30–60 minutes a day.

Ways to help you stick with it

Getting warm, sweaty or a bit puffed out doesn't feel that great, but it means you're working hard and getting fitter – it will get easier as you go! Here are some ways to help you stick at exercise in the long run.

Set achievable goals

For someone who hasn't been exercising at all, exercising once a week for 20 minutes might be a good start. If you feel like even 20 minutes is too much, then start at 5 minutes and gradually build this up.

Don't go it alone

Find a friend, family member or local group you can exercise with. It makes it more fun and helps you to keep on track if you know that you have this commitment to others. Letting them know what you're working towards will help them motivate you, too.

Hang in there!

If you miss a day or a week, don't give up. Try to get yourself going again.

Notice your progress

You can time yourself walking and try to beat it, or count how many push-ups you can do. Keeping track helps you notice your improvements and work out where you can go next with your exercise routine.

Try something new

If what you've been doing has gotten boring, you can try a few things to reinvigorate yourself. Like getting some coaching to develop your skills, getting a friend involved, or trying something completely different.

Find something flexible that you can do when you feel like it

Exercise isn't just lifting weights in a gym, it involves all kinds of physical activities. Try a Zumba or dance DVD, go skating or blading, throw a few hoops, kick a footy in the park or go for a walk with a friend.

Use technology

Why not try exercise programs on your gaming console? Or you can try using exercise apps that help you to create routines and monitor your progress.

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Top 5 reasons for not being active

- 1. It's too hot/cold/windy/rainy.**
Why not try doing something active inside – play an exercise video, or dance along to some music.
- 2. I can't be away from social media.**
Instead of connecting with friends on social media, try doing something active with a friend in real life, like going to the park with a ball.
- 3. My shorts are dirty.**
Not all activities need sportswear. You can do yoga in round-the-house clothes, as well as walking in some trackies and a tee.
- 4. I'm too busy/tired.**
You don't have to spend a long time exercising – try exercising for just 20 minutes, or breaking it down into smaller time periods that add up over the day.
- 5. I'll do it tomorrow.**
It's tempting to put off being active, but exercising regularly has so many benefits! If you're having motivation troubles, try reminding yourself of all the reasons being active benefits you.

Top 5 reasons for being active

In the tough moments when you struggle to get going, here are the top five benefits that exercising has for you:

- Better mood and more energy.
- Less stress.
- Better sleep.
- More confidence in yourself and how you look.
- Meet new friends.

Being active on a budget

Joining a gym, taking classes or visiting the swim centre can really add up, but this doesn't mean there aren't other forms of activity. If you're on a budget, or want to watch your finances because you're saving up for something, here are some of the ways you can still be active without forking out the cash.

- Park at the far end of the supermarket so you have to walk further.
- Download a free exercise app or podcast, or browse YouTube for a yoga or exercise video.
- Go to the park with a friend and a ball or Frisbee.
- Put on some music for a 10-minute dance party in your bedroom!
- Ditch the lift and use the stairs for less than four floors.
- Get skipping! Jumping rope is a cheap and quick way to get some good cardio exercise.
- Go hard when cleaning the car, house or garden – crank up the music and have fun!

Get online

If you want to do something closer to home, here are some ways you can utilise the internet for exercise.

- There are some great clubs, classes and groups out there just waiting for you to sign up and get involved. These can help motivate you, and might only be round the corner.
- Try www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au or your local council, community centre, TAFE or university for activities you might enjoy.
- If you've got a smartphone, search for videos, apps or podcasts that can help you with exercise ideas. You can find apps or websites that can record how far you've walked, help plan a run, show you yoga, Pilates or abs workouts, or play an exercise music mix – whatever you're interested in.
- You might want to have a look at couch-to-5K www.c25k.com for help with taking up running and www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au for more information.

Related factsheets

Sleep + Young People

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