

Research shows staying active can prevent depression

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Depression is a growing mental health problem worldwide. The World Health Organization predicts that by the year 2020, depression will be the second leading cause of disability after ischemic heart disease (heart disease caused by blockage in blood vessels).

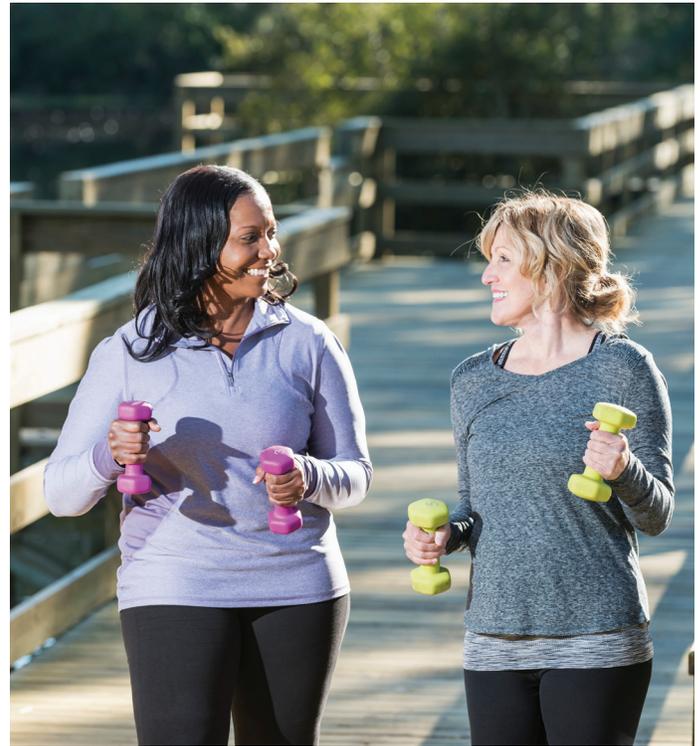
The authors reviewed 30 studies on the relationship between physical activity and mental health. Twenty-five of the studies indicated that physical activity prevented the onset of depression. Each study measured the participants’ level of physical activity at the beginning, or baseline, of the study and their risk of depression at follow-up. The more physically active the participants were, the lower their risk.

How active do you need to be to prevent depression?

The Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines recommend 150 minutes of physical activity a week. The research seems to be showing that even less exercise than that can protect against future depression. A study in 2010 reported that people who did things like gardening or walking for 120 minutes a week were at a 63% reduced risk of developing future depression. Other studies found that even less than 20 minutes of activity a day can provide protection.

What kind of physical activity can prevent depression?

This literature review only looked at aerobic physical activity, such as cycling, running, or walking. Other activities, such as weight training or yoga, could also be beneficial, but were not a part of this review.



In a nutshell...

Older adults should try to meet Canada’s recommended guidelines for physical activity: 150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous intensity aerobic physical activity every week, broken into sessions of 10 minutes or more. There is ample evidence that physical activity—even at low levels—helps prevent depression.

About the Authors

Professor Faulkner is with the Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto and Mr. Mammen is a PhD student with the same faculty. Their research focusses on various aspects of physical activity and mental health.