

EXERCISE

IS MEDICINE



What if a walking routine could ease arthritis and a yoga class could soothe anxiety as well as medicine? According to some experts, fitness can cure much of what ails us. Read on for your prescription for a longer, happier and healthier life. | by ERIN PHELAN

THERE'S NO DISPUTING IT: PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, FROM walking to weight training, is the key to good overall health, but it's also a proven remedy for much of what ails us. "If there were one drug that prevented and treated dozens of diseases and taking it had zero negative side effects, would you take it?" asks Dr. Bob Sallis, a family physician at Kaiser Permanente and founder of Exercise Is Medicine (EIM), an initiative launched by the American Coun-

cil of Sports Medicine that works to elevate the role that healthcare providers play in promoting physical activity. Of course, the answer is yes, but few doctors are prescribing exercise, and even fewer patients are aware that it can be as effective as what's in their medicine cabinets.

"There's definitely a disconnect when it comes to prescribing physical activity," says Dr. Sallis. "Doctors are able to refer an obese patient to a specialist for bariatric

surgery but not to a fitness professional. That doesn't make sense to me. Doctors are required to talk to patients about their diet and smoking but not exercise." The amount of time allotted to each doctor's visit is a factor, and so is traditional doctor training, says Susan Yungblut, director of EIM Canada. "Many of the physicians who are practising weren't taught about exercise in medical school," she adds. "Unless they have a personal interest in exercise, it might not be high on their agendas."

"Doctors should enforce exercise prescriptions in their practices," says Dr. Ali Zentner, a Vancouver-based specialist in internal medicine and obesity and medical director of Live Well, a group of medical-based exercise clinics in Lower Mainland, BC. Dr. Zentner believes that exercise has been marketed poorly, as simply the panacea for weight loss with calories in and calories out. "This overlooks the most significant benefits of exercise, which are not just weight loss but also cardiovascular fitness, cancer prevention and overall health," says Dr. Zentner. "This is one of the biggest misconceptions of our times. People start going to the gym and become demoralized when the scale doesn't move. Meanwhile, they aren't seeing the health benefits happening, mentally and physically."

But the benefits are numerous, and health professionals who are interested in fitness are taking notice. "We've had patients come off their blood pressure medications, stop taking insulin and go off antidepressants," says Sara Hodson, president and founder of Live Well Exercise Clinic, whose 11-year career in chronic diseases led her to found the private clinic. It isn't just about the amazing, long-term effects of exercise; it has an instantaneous effect on our health. "We'll have a client with a blood pressure of 140/90, but by the end of a 60-minute session, their blood pressure will be normal and stay that way for 24 hours. We have people with diabetes whose blood sugars stabilize over time. These are numbers, and they don't lie."

Ann Done is a believer. The 52-year-old special-education teacher was referred to Live Well two years ago. Standing five foot four and weighing more than 200 pounds, she was considered prediabetic and had struggled with depression for most of her adult life. Done's slow and steady weight loss journey has been championed by exercise, which she credits with helping her physically and mentally. Since lacing up her sneakers and shedding 40 pounds, she has navigated major emotional stress without the need for antidepressants, gone on to walk two full marathons and 10 half marathons and even dragged her husband onto the fitness bandwagon. "We now make better decisions about what we eat and how we move," says Done. "Exercise changed our lives."

Read on for a fitness prescription for five of the major health issues plaguing Canadian women.



DIABETES

EXERCISE RX Resistance training (which can include using dumbbells, your own body weight, resistance bands or gym machines) + cardio

DOSE Resistance training three times per week, plus 150 minutes of cardio exercise per week

Exercise can improve your A1C levels, also known as your blood's hemoglobin levels and a marker for diabetes. It can also assist in stabilizing blood glucose levels, which is vital for those living with diabetes or prediabetes. A daily workout may sound daunting, but it doesn't have to mean a trip to the gym and it doesn't have to be done all at once. "We see blood sugars normalize or stabilize post-exercise, so exercising throughout the day – 10 minutes here, 10 minutes there – can be beneficial," says Hodson. To work bursts of light cardio into your day, try parking your car a few blocks away from your office. Taking the stairs and walking the dog count, too. Resistance training is also vital for those with diabetes. Studies show that an increase in muscle mass over time can have improved benefits on glycemic control, and it means that you'll burn more calories when at rest. A good program could involve a circuit of squats, lunges, planks, push-ups and dumbbell exercises.

DEMENTIA AND ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE

EXERCISE RX Moderate to vigorous walking program

DOSE 45 minutes of cardio or walking three times per week, plus three days of resistance training

Repeated studies have connected physical activity with reducing rates of dementia, improving cognition, increasing the size of the hippocampus and delaying the development of Alzheimer's disease. A longitudinal study from the Ontario Brain Institute that examined 55 physical-activity studies and found that people over 65 who were physically active were 38 percent less likely to develop

Alzheimer's than those who were inactive – this means that one in seven cases of Alzheimer's could be prevented with a more active lifestyle. Exercise stimulates the brain's ability to make connections and encourages new cell growth. A separate study of seniors found that tai chi, in particular, can improve balance and coordination and slow the degenerative effects of dementia.

HEART DISEASE

EXERCISE RX Walking + resistance training

DOSE Some form of exercise most days of the week (for 10 minutes or more) for a total of 150 minutes a week, plus two-three days of resistance training

“Heart disease is the number one killer of women,” says Hodson. This means getting patients on a treadmill or cardio equipment, with longer warm-ups and cool-downs, and getting their blood pumping to improve circulation and blood flow, she says. If you're not a fan of the treadmill, an evening stroll counts, too, as long as it's a bit challenging. (If you're not sure if you're pushing yourself enough, use a Rate of Perceived Exertion scale, with 10 meaning you're breathless or at the point of muscle exhaustion. For best results, aim for a seven or eight on the scale on most walks. And, of course, you don't have to stop at walking. Running, indoor cycling and group fitness classes that challenge your heart rate are excellent forms of cardio training to work into your fitness regimen. To build strength, begin by incorporating light hand weights on the walk, working your way up to strength-training sessions twice a week. Improving muscle mass can also help battle heart disease.

ARTHRITIS

EXERCISE RX Water workouts

DOSE 30 minutes in the pool, two or three times a week

The Arthritis Foundation recommends working out in water because it provides 12 times the resistance of air, allowing you to challenge your muscles while taking it easy on your joints. To start, find a class at a local city pool that incorporates water walking or running and different underwater strength-building exercises. Swimming good old-fashioned laps at the pool will also do the trick.



DEPRESSION, ANXIETY AND STRESS

EXERCISE RX Yoga + cardio

DOSE Daily yoga plus 150 minutes of cardio exercise per week

Exercise increases endorphins and enkephalins (natural pain relievers and feel-good hormones), boosting energy and improving sleep, though the effects vary, says Dr. Manuela Joannou, a physician in Perth, ON. Dr. Joannou is the founder and medical director of Project Trauma Support, a treatment program for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). “Yoga is helpful for getting you back in touch with your body and focused on the mind-body connection,” she says. “Many people with PTSD have untreated depression, so the benefits of higher feel-good endorphins are relevant.” Cardio is just as important for boosting your mood. “Increasing our heart rate via cardio elevates our internal temperature, releases endorphins and gives our prefrontal cortex (the personal assistant of our brain) a nap,” says Hodson. “All of these are key in the treatment of depression, anxiety and stress.”

A morning yoga practice of sun salutations and yoga poses can start the day off right and be done in as little as 15 minutes. Roll out a mat in your bedroom and work through a series of poses before beginning your day. Don't be afraid to attend yoga classes either – they can be a great way to learn the poses and theory, and also to promote social connection. *BT*

GET IT COVERED!

Some insurance companies will reimburse you for exercise-related healthcare costs, such as gym memberships, equipment (including kayaks and bikes) and specialty classes. Contact your insurance provider to determine what you can write off.