

The Exercise Cure: Working Out Beats Drugs for Many Conditions

By Frances Chamberlain

Can exercise eliminate the need for medication? In many cases, the answer is yes. But for others, it's a more complicated issue.

We know that appropriate exercise is good for us and, depending on the illness, it may reduce or eliminate the need for medicine.

Dr. Kevin D. Plancher, an orthopedic surgeon and sports medicine expert based in Greenwich, Conn., and New York City, explains that anyone taking on a new exercise program should speak to his or her doctor first. But even with some serious chronic diseases, exercise can have beneficial results.

"Movement of the human body is good," Plancher tells *Health Radar*. "The combination of necessary medications with some exercise is important.

"We lose bone mass without exercise. You can do something as simple as taking a walk after dinner to improve your digestion, or if you have osteoarthritis of the knee, building up muscle may make the symptoms go away."

Exercise can also help patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD, which affects a patient's lung capacity.

"You may not sprint or jog with COPD, but swimming, a non-gravity sport, would help improve lung function," he notes.

Combatting High Blood Pressure

High blood pressure is another example of a condition that may be dramatically improved with exercise. Some people have been able to get off hypertension drugs with consistent exercise.

"Hypertension requires weight restriction, lowering cholesterol, and lowering blood pressure," he says. "Exercise helps with this."

Exercise can also virtually cure patients with Type 2 diabetes if it leads to significant weight loss.

For those people who are overweight or have extra fat cells, working out can change the outcome of the disease to the point where medication may no longer be needed to manage it.

"Type 1 Diabetes, which we associate with a reduced life span, may not cut someone's life short if they keep very fit," Plancher adds. "People who are diabetic, who make fitness part of their lives, can live just as long as anyone else."

Other serious chronic diseases — including Parkinson's disease and rheumatoid arthritis — can also, somewhat surprisingly, be improved with exercise.

"Parkinson's disease is a disease of rigidity," Plancher notes. "Non-gravity exercises can help with mobility, and the benefits of endorphins from exercise may improve the patient's condition. Rheumatoid arthritis creates a lack of mobility, but exercise keeps you in better shape."

Easing Chronic Pain

According to Joel Anderson, an exercise physiologist with the Western Connecticut Health Network in Connecticut, regular exercise is important even if you suffer from some type of chronic pain.

Recent research has shown that increased activity helps physical functioning in people with Parkinson's disease.

It also boosts mobility for patients with multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, and other back conditions.

The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) recommends one hour and 50 minutes of exercise each week to control or prevent disease.

According to the ACSM, exercise benefits just about every system in the body.

Most people associate the benefits of exercise with improved cardiovascular health, as well as stronger bones and muscles.

But the immune system of a fit person works better to fight both chronic and acute disease, and overall helps the body work better, numerous studies show.

"It's all about being more healthy overall," Anderson says. "People who exercise and eat well tend to be healthier than those who don't." □