

7 Ways to Combat Health Problems With Exercise

Reduce pain, fight depression, slow osteoporosis, and other ways to use exercise for a healthier life. By Linda Melone for MSN Health & Fitness

Endorphins and Your Mood

Ever notice how much better you feel when you exercise after a stressful day? It's more than just psychological, says David Geier, Jr., MD, sports medicine director of the Medical University of South Carolina. "Exercise kicks in natural brain chemicals called **endorphins** that elevate your mood." And that's just the beginning. "Exercise is good for all kinds of health problems," says Dr. Geier. Read on for ways to add to or alter your current exercise program to maximize benefits for what ails you.



Arthritis? Just Add Water



Movement helps achy joints feel less achy, but getting started can be tough when you hurt. If exercising on land is too uncomfortable, seek out a pool. Water provides 12 times the resistance of air, so you strengthen muscles without stressing your joints.

Also consider other ways to modify your current routine. If you're on a treadmill, for example, raise the incline to increase the challenge instead of jogging or running, which can impact joints. Plan to exercise later in the day if you wake up with painful joints. And be sure to warm up thoroughly by taking a hot bath or shower and/or starting out slowly. Keep in mind the 2-hour rule: "If you still hurt 2 hours after exercise, cut back on the intensity," says Nutting.

Headaches? Breathe Easy

If you're leaving work with a headache from a hectic day and heading to the gym, take a few minutes to relax, says Karilee H. Shames PhD, RN, author of *Feeling Fat, Fuzzy or Frazzled?* (Hudson Street Press, 2005) and a Certified Clinical Specialist in Psychiatric Nursing and in Holistic Nursing. "Sit in your car or other quiet place and do some slow deep breathing before you go into a noisy gym." Or consider skipping the gym and walking outdoors in nature or walking on a **home treadmill** instead (if home is quieter).

Osteoporosis? Up the Weights

If your last [bone mineral scan](#) was less than optimal, resistance training can help stimulate bone growth. "Any exercise is good," says Geier. "But focus on weight bearing or resistance training. Even light resistance in addition to walking has some impact." The most effective exercises work multiple joints, such as the squat [1]. Keep in mind, however, that an exercise affects only the bone(s) involved in the move, says Mark Nutting, CSCS, NSCA personal trainer of the year 2009, of Saco Sport and Fitness, Maine.



"So exercises that strengthen your legs, hips and spine won't benefit your wrists," says Nutting. Strive for a full body resistance program focusing on large muscle groups. Include squats and overhead shoulder presses, which strengthen the bones most often weakened by osteoporosis.

If you enjoy walking, try picking up the pace, says Naheed Ali, MD, author of *Are You Fit To Live? 4 Steps to Improving Your Health* (SabellaPress, 2009) and a faculty member of The Pennsylvania Institute of Technology. "Speed walking loosens you up and allows for much better circulation throughout all regions of the body, including the brain," says Dr. Ali.

Depressed? Get Moving

Feeling down? Join a class or go for a run. "Mild exercise is effective to a certain extent against virtually any form of depression," says Dr. Ali. "But more intense movement and exercise can be carried out if you've been working out consistently for a long period of time. Being around other people can help lift your mood as well, especially if loneliness brings on depression." ([What are the symptoms of depression?](#))

Join an exercise class or a running or walking club. You'll combine the physical benefits of exercise with the psychological lift of social interaction. Or go for a long run. Runners often report a euphoric state called a "runner's high" after running long distances [2]. "Cardiovascular exercise is most likely to release the feel-good neurotransmitters (brain chemicals) and trigger a 'high,'" says Geier.

Menopausal? Combine Weights and Cardio

Keep active by lifting weights and performing cardiovascular exercise and you'll be less likely to gain weight after menopause. Hormonal changes and a drop in muscle mass during menopause can make it harder to lose weight, which often accumulates around the abdominal area. ([What are the symptoms of menopause?](#)) "Weight lifting increases muscle mass and keeps your metabolism stoked," says Geier. "Resistance exercise 2 to 3 times a week also helps keep bones strong and reduces your risk of osteoporosis after menopause." Add regular walking, swimming, biking or other cardiovascular

activity 30 minutes, 5 days a week or perform 3, 10-minute mini exercise bouts to reap the same health benefits, as recommended by the American College of Sports Medicine

Back Pain? Work the Core

Poor posture and weak core, back or abdominal muscles can add up to back pain. "You need to develop the strength and ability to stabilize your spine and keep it in proper alignment while doing activities," says Nutting. "Practice good posture and learn how to properly engage your core muscles." The best core strengthener: the plank. Lie on your stomach on an exercise mat with your elbows close to your sides and directly under your shoulders, palms down. Contract your core and abdominal muscles. Slowly lift your entire torso off the floor or mat, maintaining a stiff torso and legs. Avoid any arching or sagging of your low back or hiking (upwards) in your hips. Holding this position for a 20 seconds or longer. Add this to your exercise routine 2 to 3 times a week, working up to 60 seconds. Raise one leg off the ground for a greater challenge.



Fibromyalgia or Chronic Pain? Slow and Steady

Motivating yourself to exercise can be difficult when you're in chronic pain. And, unlike arthritis, symptoms of fibromyalgia can vary from day to day and pain may affect different muscles as well. "What works for one person with fibromyalgia may not work for another," says Geier. Be sure to warm up thoroughly, start easy and use long rest periods. "If you overdo, it can take a long time to recover," says Geier. Start with as few as 3 to 5 minutes and work your way up to 20 minutes or longer by adding 1 to 2 minutes at a time.

Try various activities such as walking, swimming (look for facilities with heated pools) and biking. [Recumbent bikes](#) offer more back support and may be preferable to uprights. Start slowly, progress gradually and be consistent.

