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February 29, 2008, 1:12 pm

The Cure for Exhaustion? More Exercise



Feeling fatigued? (George Ruhe for The New York Times)

When a person is sapped by fatigue, the last thing he or she wants to do is exercise. But new research shows that regular, low-intensity exercise may help boost energy levels in people suffering from fatigue.

Fatigue is one of the most common health symptoms and can be a sign of a variety of medical problems. However, about one in four people suffers from general fatigue not associated with a serious medical condition.

University of Georgia researchers decided to study whether exercise can be used to treat fatigue. The research, which appears in the February issue of the journal *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, involved 36 volunteers who were not regular exercisers but who complained of persistent fatigue.

One group of fatigued volunteers was prescribed 20 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise three times a week for six weeks. The second group engaged in low-intensity aerobic exercise for the same time period, while a third control group did not exercise.

The study volunteers used exercise bikes that allowed the researchers to control their level of exertion. The low-intensity exercise was equivalent to a leisurely, easy walk. The more intense exercise was similar to a fast-paced walk up hills. Patients with fatigue due to serious medical conditions, such as those with chronic fatigue syndrome, weren't included in the study.

Both of the exercise groups had a 20 percent increase in energy levels by the end of the study, compared to the control group. However, the researchers found that more intense exercise isn't the best way to reduce fatigue. The low-intensity group reported a 65 percent drop in feelings of fatigue, compared to a 49 percent drop in the group doing more intense exercise.

"Too often we believe that a quick workout will leave us worn out — especially when we are already feeling fatigued," said researcher Tim Puetz, who recently completed his doctorate at the university and is the lead author of the study. "However, we have shown that regular exercise can actually go a long way in increasing feelings of energy — particularly in sedentary individuals."

Why exercise helps fatigue isn't clear, but Dr. Puetz said his findings suggest exercise acts directly on the central nervous system to increase energy and reduce fatigue. Notably, the improvements in energy and fatigue were not related to increases in aerobic fitness.

"A lot of people are overworked and not sleeping enough," said Patrick O'Connor, co-director of the university's exercise psychology laboratory. "Exercise is a way for people to feel more energetic. There's a scientific basis for it, and there are advantages to it compared to things like caffeine and energy drinks."

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1. February 29th, 2008 1:57 pm I've noticed that exercise (usually a 35-minute run or a 90-minute yoga class) improves my energy level and mental clarity during the day and also helps me to sleep better at night. Any evidence for energy "cycles" regulated by exercise?
— Posted by Caroline

2. February 29th, 2008 2:47 pm It's always amazing to me to hear people complain about exhaustion, back pain, weight gain, even headaches and then find out that they don't exercise. Exercise is the first step to take when faced with minor medical concerns. It shouldn't even be a question. Whenever I feel tired in the evenings, my first trip is to the gym. Even just ten or twenty minutes on a treadmill makes a world of difference.
— Posted by David Pal

3. February 29th, 2008 2:50 pm The most important question to ask is, which people within the exercise groups benefitted and which did not? Did some people feel less fatigue, while others had no response? And, if so, what are the differences between responders and non responders in the exercising groups? The model used in Chinese medicine may provide some insight. Fatigue essentially breaks down into two categories- those who have too little energy, and those whose energy is stuck (stagnant) and unavailable to them. The stagnant type of fatigue would respond to exercise, as the physical movement gets the previously unavailable energy moving and available. The deficient (too little) energy people would not improve with exercise. In fact, the deficient group might become worse due to the consumption of energy that is already too little. This might explain the less desirable response in the higher intensity exercise group compared to the lower intensity exercise group. It would be wonderful to see these questions answered so that physicians could know which patient should exercise more, and which one should get more rest. Studies like this are interesting, but would be much more useful if we asked the correct questions.
— Posted by Robert, MD

4. February 29th, 2008 2:59 pm After having a stent put in a few years ago, I began an exercise program that consists of nothing more than walking 4 miles on a treadmill before breakfast and two or three miles during the day. I found that on the days that I omit the morning walk, I feel rather sluggish and tired all day. But after the morning exercise, I feel peppy most of the day. Warning-do not exercise before going to bed. It makes you keyed up.
— Posted by howard

5. February 29th, 2008 3:12 pm Gee, couch potatoes who feel exhausted might benefit from a little exercise — how much did they spend on this study?
— Posted by Frank Richmond

6. February 29th, 2008 3:25 pm Since when is chronic fatigue syndrome classified as a "serious medical condition?" Please don't respond by saying how profoundly this condition affects quality of life. That's not my point. These are subjects who should have been included in the study. What harm would come to them? It might have helped.
— Posted by jack

7. February 29th, 2008 3:30 pm what kind of chair is pictured here, and where can I get one? It looks REALLY comfortable!
— Posted by JC

8. February 29th, 2008 3:39 pm I was fortunate to make this counter-intuitive discovery on my own back in my 20's. Working repetitive physical jobs at the time, I'd come home feeling like the couch was the only place for me. In a paroxysm of self-discipline, I decided to go for a run instead. Incredibly, I would feel so much better afterwards. Ever since, my personal lexicon equates "fatigue" with something totally different from true exhaustion. Maybe one day, we'll know why. My theory says it has something to do with repetitive use of the same muscles over and over during our typical work days—even if that just means sitting in an office chair.
— Posted by MT

9. February 29th, 2008 4:35 pm If I don't work out in the morning, I'm pretty much useless for the rest of the day.
— Posted by Katie

10. February 29th, Since when is the chronic fatigue syndrome a serious medical condition? I never heard of



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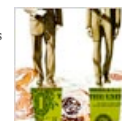
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2008
4:46 pm

anyone dying from it Many experts in the field think it's a form of depression. If anybody should exercise, that group should.

Martin

— Posted by MARTIN FRANK

11. February 29th,
2008
4:56 pm

From my own experience I would have to say that while exercise may help some it will not help all.

I have felt sort of constantly tired and slightly drained of energy since I entered puberty about 13 years ago. I do exercise regularly, walking to work several times a week, more than a mile each way.

I do get a buzz of energy after my walk and feel energized for part of the day but then later my energy plummets again and I'm left feeling tired all over again.

I don't know if I have a medical condition to explain this, I've never been diagnosed with one. I will keep exercising because I do like it, I just know that it won't completely relieve my fatigue.

— Posted by Shannon

12. February 29th,
2008
5:05 pm

Having a regular exercise program does loads for my energy level. It's just a matter of overcoming the inertia if I get out of the habit. If I've been exercising regularly, I'll come home from work, grab the gym bag, and head out. If I've gone a week or so without the gym, I have to take the gym bag to work with me, and stop there before I go to the house, or I won't make it.

I sleep better, wake up more refreshed, and feel generally perkier (which frightens my co-workers, who think I'm already quite perky enough, thanks!) when I'm about a week into the every-other-day gym habit.

— Posted by Rowan

13. February 29th,
2008
5:06 pm

Right on! Sometimes I am exhausted after work but force myself to go to a yoga class anyway. One hour later, bada-bing-bada-boom ... ENERGY!

PS: That chair looks delish.

— Posted by NK

14. February 29th,
2008
5:09 pm

Indubitably!!!

Anytime I go for long periods of time w/o regular exercise, my energy levels drop and I get "fatigued" more often, especially right after work.

If you're not up for running or something intense, a brisk walk should suffice, preferably one or two subway stops from home.

— Posted by Art

15. February 29th,
2008
5:15 pm

#3 has it right. People are fatigued for a REASON. Often multiple reasons at the same time, actually.

Stuck energy, due to being constipated or stressed or being busy and eating a lot of calories but never getting any exercise—this can benefit from exercise and, usually, dietary changes. Eliminate the junk.

But fatigue due to undiagnosed low thyroid function, undiagnosed infections, etc—this will not improve much.

The confusion comes because often people have one from paragraph one, one from paragraph two as well.

And then when they don't exercise, because they're fatigued, they DO get even more fatigued because they're so decompensated and atrophied.

The solution isn't to flog people into exercise in all cases and make them feel self-conscious and guilty if they don't do it.

The solution is to spend a lot of time with the person and discern—it's called DIAGNOSING! through clinical history, something doctors hardly do anymore—the true cause or causes of the fatigue. And treat it ****adequately****.

— Posted by apple

16. February 29th,
2008
5:16 pm

A close friend of mine has had CLL for 20 years, and one of the prime symptoms of her disease is profound fatigue. She battles fatigue with brisk walking almost daily, and on the days she cannot hike her energy sinks. The workout works!

— Posted by abigail

17. February 29th,
2008
5:34 pm

The point of the article isn't that exercise reduces fatigue. It's that **LOW INTENSITY** exercise is actually better than moderate or high-intensity exercise for a sedentary person. This is not running, not even jogging. This is a leisurely 20 minute walk. And the point is that feeling tired isn't an excuse for not going for a leisurely 20 minute stroll.

My experience is that when I feel exhausted I may well be short of sleep and thus physically and mentally fatigued. But it usually turns out that the feeling of exhaustion, rather than tiredness, is from stress, anxiety, resentment, or other negative feelings. This is exactly what exercise is widely found to alleviate. And what this study is saying is that you don't have to exercise to the point where you get an endorphin rush in order to reap the benefits.

I know this sort of thing makes the more judgmental folks mad, because they think the rest of us are bad people for not being jocks. But I hope some get encouragement from the article to just move around a little. I find that even when I'm exhausted and think I can't possibly spare a couple of minutes to do this, it turns out that the little bit of movement helps me work smarter when I get back.

— Posted by eliyah

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