

Health Insights

March 2024

Exercising to Relax

Aerobic exercise holds the key for your head, just as it does for your heart. You may not agree at first; getting started is the hardest part, and in the beginning, exercise will be more work than fun. But as you get into shape, you'll find that you tolerate exercise, then enjoy it, and finally depend on it.

Regular aerobic exercise brings remarkable changes to your body, heart, metabolism, and spirits. It has a unique capacity to exhilarate and relax, to stimulate and calm, to counter depression and dissipate stress. This experience has been common knowledge among endurance athletes for years and has been verified in clinical trials using exercise to treat anxiety disorders and clinical depression. The best part is that you don't have to be an athlete; these benefits come with aerobic exercise of any skill level.

The mental benefits of aerobic exercise have a neurochemical basis. Exercise reduces levels of the body's stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol. It also stimulates the production of endorphins, the body's natural painkillers and mood elevators. Endorphins are responsible for the "runner's high" and the feelings of relaxation and optimism that accompany hard exercise—or, at least, the hot shower after your workout is over.

Behavioral factors also contribute to the emotional benefits of exercise. As your body adapts and your strength and stamina increase, your self-image will improve. Your renewed vigor and energy will help you succeed in many tasks, and the discipline of regular exercise will help you achieve other important goals.

Exercise and sports also provide opportunities to get away from it all, whether your goal is to enjoy some solitude or make friends and build networks. Exercise is play and recreation; when your body is busy, your mind will be distracted from the worries of daily life and free to think creatively.

Almost any type of exercise will help. Many people find that using large muscle groups in a rhythmic, repetitive fashion (sometimes called "muscular meditation") works best. Walking and jogging are prime examples; even a simple 20-minute stroll can clear the mind and reduce stress. Some people prefer vigorous workouts that burn stress along with calories. And the same stretching exercises that help relax your muscles after a hard workout will help relax your mind as well.

Many forms of exercise reduce stress directly while helping to prevent physical illness. Regular physical activity will lower your blood pressure, improve your cholesterol, and reduce your blood sugar. Exercise cuts the risk of heart attack, stroke, diabetes, colon and breast cancers, osteoporosis and fractures, obesity, depression, and even dementia (memory loss). Exercise slows the aging process, increases energy, and prolongs life.

Exercising to relax - Harvard Health Publishing. Harvard Health. (2020, July 7). <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/exercising-to-relax>



Mental Health Moment

Creating a Balanced Exercise Program

Physical activity is an important component of overall health. It has positive effects on the way your body functions and feels as well as improving aspects of mental health. When creating an exercise routine, it can be hard to know what types of physical activity should be included. A well-rounded fitness program includes 5 basic elements.

Aerobic Fitness: Aerobic activity, commonly referred to as cardio or endurance activity, is anything that raises your heart rate for an extended period. Having higher aerobic fitness makes your heart, lungs, and blood vessels carry oxygen throughout your body more efficiently. It is recommended that healthy adults perform at least 150 minutes of moderate aerobic activity or 75 minutes of vigorous aerobic activity per week.

Aerobic Activity Ideas:

- Walking
- Biking
- Dancing
- Vacuuming
- Water Aerobics

Strength Training: Strength training is an important part of a fitness plan because it increases your bone strength and muscle fitness. This will allow you to maintain a healthy weight and be able to perform everyday tasks better while preventing injury.

Strength Training Ideas:

- Handheld Weights
- Body Weight Exercises
- Resistance Bands

Core Strength: The muscles in your abdomen, pelvis, and lower back make up your core muscles. This muscle group protects your spine and helps the muscles throughout the rest of the body to work more effectively.

Core Exercises Ideas:

- Bridges
- Planks
- Sit-ups

Balance Training: As we get older our balance worsens, which can lead to injury. Balance training can improve core strength to prevent falls and create a more stable body.

Flexibility and Stretching: Flexibility ensures that you can do everyday tasks without risk of injury. Stretching improves the range of motion for joints and improves posture. It can also have a mental benefit by lessening stress and tension. Try stretching after each workout to easily add it into your routine.

"5 Basics of a Well-Rounded Fitness Routine." Mayo Clinic, Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, 1 Nov. 2022, www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/fitness/in-depth/fitness-training/art-20044792.

Managing Coping Mechanisms

When times get tough, instinct often pushes people toward coping mechanisms that help people feel like they're escaping reality by relieving stress or distracting their minds. While this is a standard response, it can become problematic when one turns to harmful, unhealthy coping mechanisms. Unhealthy coping mechanisms include oversleeping, excessive substance use, over- or under-eating and impulsive retail spending.

Healthy coping mechanisms can help you positively address such feelings and develop long-lasting habits. Consider these healthier coping alternatives:

- **Create task lists:** Making a task list of personal goals can help you achieve what you want and elevate your mood by physically seeing your accomplishments when they're checked off the list.
- **Talk about stress:** Find someone willing to listen to you, such as a close friend, family member or mental health professional. Putting your feelings into words can help alleviate stress and anxiety.
- **Address negative feelings:** Negativity is a normal part of life. Trying to avoid it is called avoidance behavior, which can result in reaching for unhealthy coping mechanisms. Instead, acknowledge negative feelings so you can find a healthy resolution.
- **Learn your triggers:** Knowing what situations you respond negatively to can help you keep track of your triggers and be aware of how you react.
- **Pick up a new hobby:** Fulfilling activities such as painting or running can be therapeutic. Designate a regular time and space to practice a hobby that you enjoy.

Experiencing negative or overwhelming emotions is natural, but it's important to lean on healthy coping mechanisms to help deal with stress and anxiety. Talk to your doctor or a mental health professional if you are experiencing ongoing emotional struggles.



Vegan Curried Chowder

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 medium leeks, white and light-green parts only, halved and thinly sliced (about 1 cup)
- 2 large carrots, chopped (about 1 ½ cups)
- 1 pound Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and cut into ½-inch chunks
- Kosher salt
- 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh ginger
- 2 tablespoons curry powder
- 4 cups vegetable broth
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper, or more to taste
- One 13.5-ounce can unsweetened coconut milk
- Zest and juice of 1 lime (zest removed in strips with a vegetable peeler), plus lime wedges for serving
- ½ Small head cauliflower, cut into small florets
- One 15.5-ounce can chickpeas, rinsed and drained
- ½ cup cilantro leaves, coarsely chopped

Directions:

1. Heat the olive oil in a medium Dutch oven or heavy pot over medium heat. Add the leeks, carrots, and potatoes. Season with 1 teaspoon salt. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables begin to soften, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic, ginger, curry, and cayenne. Cook, stirring, until the mixture is sizzling, about 1 minute. Stir in the coconut milk, vegetable broth and 4 cups water. Add the lime zest. Bring the soup to a simmer and cook until reduced slightly and the vegetables are almost tender, about 10 minutes.
2. Add the cauliflower and chickpeas. Continue to simmer rapidly until the vegetables are very tender and the soup is thick and flavorful, about 20 minutes more. Remove the lime zest. Season with salt and additional cayenne as needed. Stir in the lime juice and cilantro and serve with lime wedges.

Calories: 271kcal, Carbohydrates: 29g, Protein: 7g, Fat: 16g

Stevenson, A. (2021). Vegan curried vegetable chowder. Food Network. <https://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/food-network-kitchen/vegan-curry-vegetable-chowder-9430495>



March Quiz

Exercising to Relax

1. Which of the following is NOT one of the changes happening to your body when engaging in regular physical activity?
 - a. Increased metabolism
 - b. Increased anxiety
 - c. Increased spirits
2. Regular physical activity will _____ your blood pressure, improve your cholesterol, and reduce your blood sugar.

Creating a Balanced Exercise Program

3. Which of the following are NOT one of the 5 basic elements of a fitness program?
 - a. Aerobic fitness
 - b. Balance training
 - c. Sitting all day
4. It is recommended that healthy adults perform at least _____ of moderate aerobic activity or _____ of vigorous aerobic activity per week.

Mental Health Moment

5. Which of the following is considered a healthy coping alternative?
 - a. Excessive substance use
 - b. Learning your triggers
 - c. Impulsive spending

See page 4 for quiz answers.

Healthy Habits Calendar

Exercising to Relax

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1 Welcome to March! Start the Stand Up for Health Challenge.	2
3	4 Monday Motivation: Text one person who motivates you and tell them thank you.	5	6	7 Challenge Check-In: How many times did you stand up at work today?	8 Friday Fitness: Go on a morning walk to get movement and some sun.	9
10	11	12 Tasty Tuesday: Try a new recipe that includes whole grains like brown rice or quinoa.	13 Wellness Wednesday: Think of three ways that you can get outside the rest of the month.	14	15	16 Social Saturday: Invite friends over for brunch.
17	18 Monday Motivation: Write down 1 wellness goal for the week and how you are going to achieve it.	19	20	21 Thursday Tip: Try habit stacking by doing two wellness things at once, like listening to a guided meditation while stretching.	22	23
24 Sunday Sleep: Avoid electronics an hour before bed.	25	26	27 Challenge Check in: How much water did you drink today?	28	29 Friday Fitness: Do a 25 minute stretching routine.	30 Social Saturday: Attend a group fitness class! This can help you get movement in while being social.
31						

Answers to Quiz:

Q1: b. Increased anxiety | Q2: lower | Q3: c. Sitting all day | Q4: 150 Minutes, 75 Minutes | Q5: b. Learning your triggers

Stand Up for Health

30 Day Challenge

Stand up, take a stretch break and drink some water once every hour while you are at home or work. This allows you to take a mental break and will help you be more productive. Although every individuals' water needs vary based on their personal health and circumstances, the traditional advice to drink half your body weight in ounces of water is a good goal to set! To help you remember, pick a specific time every hour to take your stretch break.

Stand up, take a stretch break, and record how many ounces you drink every hour.

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Sunday	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>
Monday	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>
Tuesday	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>
Wednesday	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>
Thursday	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>
Friday	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>
Saturday	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>	Water Intake _____ Hourly Stretch Breaks <input type="checkbox"/>