

**FACULTY OF MEDICINE AND HEALTH SCIENCES
STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY**

MEDIA STATEMENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: WEDNESDAY, 9 MAY 2018

World Move for Health Day – 10 May 2018

Physical exercise benefits the body and brain

We are well aware of the benefits of exercise to your physical health – it helps to control your weight, lowers your risk of heart disease and type 2 diabetes, and even protects against some types of cancer. Now scientific evidence is also emerging of the benefits of exercise to your mental health.

World Move for Health Day is celebrated on 10 May. This annual global initiative was initiated by the World Health Organisation to promote physical activity as essential for health and well-being.

“Research shows that just 150 minutes (two-and-a-half hours) of moderate-intensity exercise (including walking) a week lowers your risk of dying early from many of the leading causes of death. It is now coming to light that physical activity also has a major protective effect on the brain and nervous tissues and reduces your risk of developing neurological conditions,” says Prof Wayne Derman, Director of the Institute of Sport and Exercise Medicine (ISEM) at Stellenbosch University’s Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences.

“We have long known that exercise aids sleep, reduces anxiety and can even improve your mood and memory. New research is showing that it also offers some protection against dementia and that it can be beneficial in the treatment of depression,” explains Derman.

He highlights some of the recent research on the topic:

A multinational study, that also includes data from research subjects in South Africa, was recently published in the *Journal of Experimental Gerontology* and emphasises the dangers of not being active. The researchers found that people who are sedentary (inactive) for more than eight hours a day, have a 1.56 times higher risk of experiencing memory loss and other symptoms of mild cognitive impairment (MCI). MCI is often a precursor for neurological conditions such as Alzheimer’s disease (AD).

A Finnish study published last month in the journal *Age and Ageing* showed that low fitness levels are associated with an increased risk of dementia. The study followed more than 2000 Finnish men for an average period of 22 years, and found that those with a high cardiorespiratory fitness ($VO_{2max} >36.5$ ml/kg/min) had a 20% lower risk of developing dementia than men with low cardiorespiratory fitness ($VO_{2max} <23.7$).

The protective effect of exercise on the brain was reiterated by another study. Researchers from China recently reported in the journal *Neural Plasticity* that exercise could slow down the progression of cognitive impairment in ageing populations, and potentially provide a cost-effective therapy in the fight against dementia.

Researchers from Norway combined the results of 23 earlier studies that looked at the effects of exercise on depression. They reported in the *Journal of Affective Disorders* that exercise had a significant effect on depression compared to no intervention, but was not quite as effective as psychological treatments or antidepressant medication. They recommended incorporating exercise alongside traditional interventions for effective treatment of depression.

“This research adds to the already long list of benefits that physical exercise offers the body and brain. It is a cost-effective and accessible intervention that everyone can use to improve not only the quantity, but also the quality of their life,” Derman concludes.

Sources

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