

# Let's Get Physical



mental  
health  
foundation

**There are many reasons why physical activity is good for your body – having a healthy heart and supple joints are just two.** But did you know that physical activity is also beneficial for your mental health and wellbeing?



Research shows that exercise influences the release and uptake of chemicals in your brain that make you feel good. Staying active can lift your mood, reduce stress, help you deal with negative emotions and even help with anxiety and reduce the risk of depression and dementia.

Even though the benefits of physical activity for reducing obesity and preventing chronic illnesses have been very well publicised, this has resulted in relatively little increased uptake of physical activity, with national surveys showing only one-third of the population meet UK physical activity guidelines.

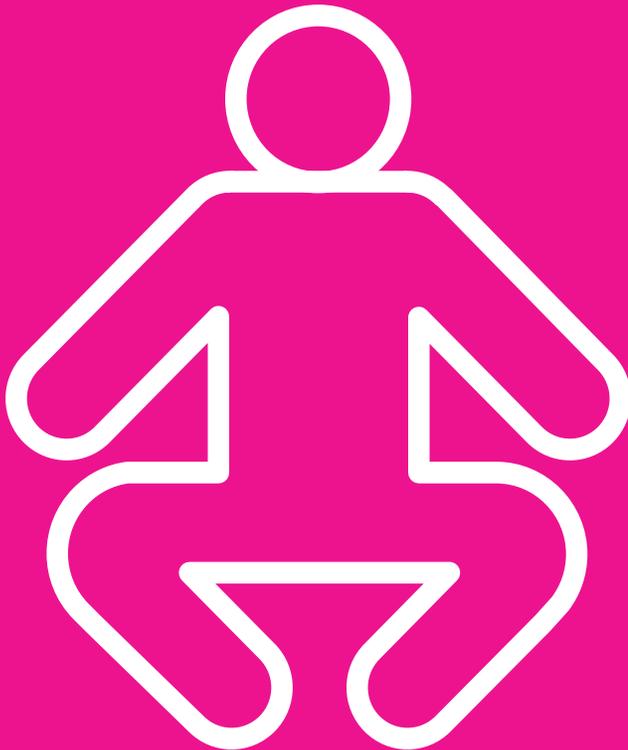
The aim of our campaign is to change the way we view physical activity in the UK: to see it not as something we 'have to do', 'should do' or 'ought to do' for our health but as something which we do because we personally value its positive benefits to our wellbeing.

As part of our work to help the nation lead mentally healthy lives, we have produced this pocket guide to show the positive impact that physical activity can have on your own mental wellbeing, including some tips and suggestions to help you get started.

Being active doesn't have to mean going to the gym, taking up jogging or wearing lycra. There are lots of ways to be active, find the one that works for you and let's all get physical!

**'It is exercise alone that supports the spirits, and keep the mind in vigor'**

**Marcus Tullius Cicero**



## What is physical activity?

At a very basic level, physical activity just means any movement of your body that uses your muscles and expends energy. One of the great things about physical activity is that there are endless possibilities and there will be an activity to suit almost everyone!

An easy way to look at types of physical activity is to put them in four separate categories:

### Daily Physical Activity

Everyday things such as walking to the bus stop or climbing stairs

### Play

Unstructured activity that is done for fun or enjoyment

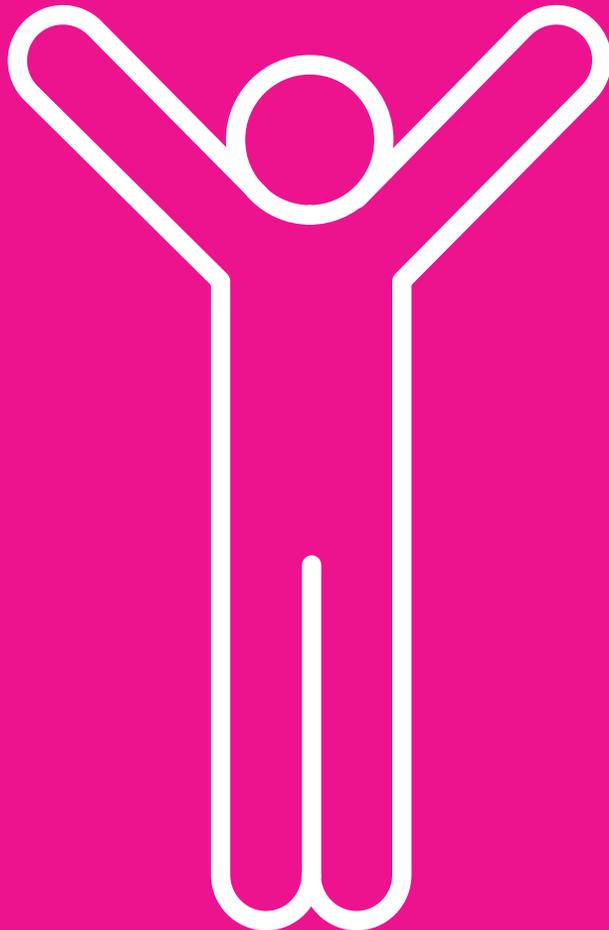
### Exercise

Purposeful activity carried out to improve health or fitness, such as jogging or cycling, or lifting weights to increase strength

### Sport

Structured and competitive activity, anything from football to squash to cricket

All these activities can vary in intensity. Moderate intensive activities include brisk walking or dancing. Vigorous intensity needs more effort and causes your heart rate and breathing rate to increase, like running or football. You will be able to tell when your activity is vigorous as it will be difficult to hold a conversation without pausing to breathe after every few words.



## What is wellbeing?

The government recently defined wellbeing as ‘a positive physical, social and mental state’. For our purposes we are focusing on mental wellbeing.

**Mental wellbeing does not have a single universal definition, but it does encompass factors such as:**

- The sense of feeling good about ourselves and being able to function well individually or in relationships
- The ability to deal with the ups and downs of life such as coping with challenges and making the most of opportunities
- The feeling of connection to our community and surroundings
- Having control and freedom over our lives
- Having a sense of purpose and feeling valued

Of course, psychological wellbeing does not mean being happy all the time and it does not mean you won't experience negative or painful emotions such as grief, loss, or failure, which are a part of normal life. However, whatever your age, there is good scientific evidence showing that being physically active can help you lead a mentally healthier life.

## What impact does physical activity have on wellbeing?

Physical activity has a huge potential to enhance our wellbeing. Even a short burst of 10 minutes brisk walking increases our mental alertness, energy and positive mood.

Participation in regular physical activity can increase our self-esteem and reduce stress and anxiety. It also plays a role in preventing mental health problems and improving the quality of life of people experiencing these.



### Impact on our mood

Physical activity has been shown to have a positive impact on our mood. A study asked people to rate their mood immediately after periods of physical activity (e.g. going for a walk or doing housework) and periods of inactivity (e.g. reading a book or watching television). Researchers found the participants felt more content, more awake and calmer after being physically active compared to periods of inactivity. They also found that the effect of physical activity on mood was greatest when mood was initially low.

There are many studies looking at physical activity at different levels of intensity and its impact on people's mood. Overall research has found that low intensity aerobic exercise, for 30–35 min, on 3–5 days per week for 10–12 weeks was optimal for increasing positive moods (e.g. enthusiasm, alertness).

### Impact on our stress

When events occur which make us feel threatened or upset our balance in some way, our body's defences take effect and create a stress response, which we may make us feel a variety of physical symptoms, behave differently and experience more intense emotions.

The most common physical signs of stress include sleeping problems, sweating and loss of appetite. Symptoms like these are triggered by a rush of stress hormones in our body which when released enable us to deal with pressures or threats – otherwise known as the “fight or flight” response. It is these hormones, adrenaline and noradrenaline, which raise our blood pressure,

increase our heart rate and increase the rate at which we perspire, preparing our body for an emergency response. They can also reduce blood flow to our skin and reduce our stomach activity, while cortisol, another stress hormone, releases fat and sugar into the system to boost our energy. Physical exercise can be very effective in relieving stress and research has shown that physically fit individuals have a reduced stress response.

### Impact on our self-esteem

Self-esteem is a key indicator of our psychological wellbeing. People with high self-esteem tend to have high life satisfaction, resilience and greater achievement in education and work. On the other hand low self-esteem tends to be associated with mental illness, anxiety and hopelessness.

Self-esteem can be defined as the sum of a person's perceptions of their competence in several areas of their life, for example academic, emotional, social and physical areas. Physical activity has a strong influence on physical self-esteem and a smaller but significant influence on overall self-esteem. Studies have found that people who participate in physical activity typically have greater physical and overall self-esteem. This relationship has been found in children, adolescents, young adults, adults and older people, and across both males and females.

### Dementia and cognitive decline in older people

Increasing life expectancy and a growing population of people over 65 years has led to an increase in the number of people living with dementia and cognitive decline. The main symptom of dementia is memory loss; it is a progressive disease which results in people

becoming more impaired over time. Decline in cognitive functions such as attention and concentration also occurs in older people including those who do not go on to develop dementia. Physical activity can protect people against developing dementia and for people who have already developed the disease can delay further declines in functioning. Studies show that adults participating in daily physical activity have a 20-30% lower risk for dementia. Physical activity also seems to reduce the likelihood of experiencing cognitive decline in people who do not go on to develop dementia.

### Impact on depression and anxiety

Evidence shows physical activity can reduce the risk for depression and anxiety, and it can improve the quality of life of people with these conditions. Research shows that physical activity is an effective treatment for people with mild to moderate depression and can be used as a standalone treatment or in combination with medication and/or psychological therapy. It has very few side effects and does not have the stigma that some people perceive to be attached to taking antidepressants or attending counselling.

Physical activity can reduce levels of anxiety in people with mild symptoms and may also be helpful for treating more severe anxiety such as panic attacks or generalised anxiety disorder. Physical activity is available to all, has few costs attached and is an empowering approach that can support self-management.

For more details about how physical activity can help increase wellbeing, and prevent or manage mental health problems read our full report on [www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)





## How much physical activity should I be doing?

We know all too well that the majority of people in the UK do not meet current physical activity guidelines.

With only 40% of men and 28% of women meeting recommended physical activity levels in the 2008 Health Survey for England, it is important that people are given the knowledge and support they need to make physical activity a healthy yet enjoyable part of life.

**The Department of Health recommends that adults aim to be active daily and complete 2½ hours of moderate intensity activity over a week or 30 minutes five times a week (DoH, 2011).**

**It may sound like a lot, but it isn't as daunting as it first appears and we have lots of suggestions to help you get started.**

#### **Where do I start?**

Once you have decided that you want to be more physically active, there are a few points worth thinking about. Apart from improving your physical and mental wellbeing, what else do you want to get out of being active?

Ask yourself whether you'd prefer being indoors or out, doing a group or individual activity or trying a new sport? If you're put off by sporty exercises or feel uninspired at the thought of limiting yourself to just one activity, think outside the box and remember a walk, doing housework and gardening are all physical activities. Also, would you rather go it alone or do an activity with a friend? Social support is a great motivator and sharing your experiences, goals and achievements will help you retain focus.

#### **Overcoming barriers**

It can be a bit scary making changes to your life and most people get anxious about trying something new. Some common barriers, such as cost, injury or illness, stress or anxiety, lack of energy, fear of failure or even the weather can hinder people from getting started; however, practical and emotional support from friends, family and experts really does help.

Body image can act as a barrier to participating in physical activity. People who are anxious about how their body will look to others while they are exercising may avoid exercise as a result. For women, attending a female only exercise class or a ladies only swimming session may help to overcome anxiety as a barrier to initially starting to exercise.

Exercising with a companion can also help to reduce anxiety about how your body looks to others and may be particularly helpful during the first few exercise sessions. The environment can influence how one feels too, gyms with mirrored walls tend to heighten anxiety, as does exercising near a window or other space where one feels 'on show'.

#### **Make time**

What time do you have available for exercise? You may need to re-jig commitments to make room for extra activities or choose something that fits into your busy schedule.

### **Be practical**

Will you need support from friends and family to complete your chosen activities, or is there a chance your active lifestyle will have an impact on others in your life? Find out how much it will cost and, if necessary, what you can do to make it affordable.

### **Right for you**

What kind of activity would suit you best? Think about what parts of your body you want to exercise and whether you'd prefer to be active at home or fancy a change of scene.

### **Making it part of daily life**

Adopting a more active lifestyle can be as simple as doing daily tasks more energetically, or making small changes to your routine.

### **Start slowly**

If physical activity is new to you, it's best to build your ability up gradually. Focus on task goals such as improving sport skills or stamina rather than competition and keep a record of your activity and review it to provide feedback on your progress. There are so many apps and social networks accessible for free to help.

### **Goals**

It's really important to set goals to measure progress which might motivate you. Try using a pedometer or an app on your smart phone to measure your speed and distance travelled, or add on an extra stomach crunch or swim an extra length at the end of your session.

Remember, you won't see improvement in physical conditioning every day. Making the regular commitment to doing physical activity is an achievement in itself and every activity session can improve your mood.

### **At home**

There are lots of activities you can do without leaving your front door and which involve minimal cost. It can be as simple as pushing the mower with extra vigour, speeding up the housework or doing an exercise DVD in the living room.

### **At work**

Whether you're on your feet, sat at a desk or behind the wheel during your working hours, there are many ways you can get more active. Try using the stairs for journeys less than four floors, walking or cycling a slightly longer route home and using your lunch hour to take a brisk walk, do an exercise class or go for a swim. The change of scenery will do you good too.

### **Out and about**

Being out of doors is a prime time for boosting your activity levels and research suggests that doing physical activity in an outdoor 'green' environment has greater positive effects on wellbeing compared to physical activity indoors.

Making small changes like leaving the car at home for short journeys or getting off the bus a stop earlier, to higher intensity activities like joining in with your children's football game or jogging with the dog can all help boost your mood.

# Further ideas for starting or keeping up with physical activity

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## NHS

The NHS Choices website also has a number of tools to help people get started with physical activity, including exercises for older people, strength and flexibility videos, advice on taking up new sports, advice on getting started walking. The tools are available here:  
<http://www.nhs.uk>

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## The Great Outdoor Gym Company

Outdoor gyms where some gym equipment is provided in outside spaces for people to use for free e.g. the Great Outdoor Gym Company  
<http://www.tgogc.com/>

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## The British Heart Foundation

The British Heart Foundation 'Health at Work' website provides further suggestions and some resources to get started promoting physical activity at work  
<http://www.bhf.org.uk/healthatwork>

We hope you found this booklet useful and informative.

The Mental Health Foundation is an independent charity. We rely on the support of people like you to fund our pioneering research and information provision.

To find out how you can donate or become involved with the work of the Foundation contact us.

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