

Low impact aerobic exercise reduces fatigue in auto-immune conditions says multi-study review

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People with auto-immune conditions like MS, arthritis and lupus can benefit from low impact aerobic exercise -- including walking and cycling -- that increases in intensity, duration and frequency. A review of studies between 1987 and 2006 shows that 12-week programmes that involved exercising for 30 to 60 minutes, three times a week, yielded the most effective results.

A team led by nurse researcher Dr Jane Neill from Flinders University in Adelaide, examined 162 research studies published between 1987 and 2006, analysing 36 in detail.

They discovered that there was evidence that people with conditions like multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis and systemic lupus erythematosus could benefit from exercise that gradually increased in intensity, duration and frequency.

“Fatigue is a major symptom in all three conditions and can cause a range of physical, psychological and social problems” says Dr Neill.

“Our review showed that aerobic exercise can significantly reduce fatigue and that some behavioural, nutritional and physiological interventions are also very effective.”

Studies reviewed by the team tested 38 interventions on more than 1,700 patients. 24 resulted in statistically reduced fatigue or increased vitality levels.

The effective aerobic exercise programmes lasted an average of 12 weeks, with participants exercising for 30 to 60 minutes, three times a week.

Group interventions involved supervised exercise classes, including warm up, low impact aerobic activity and strengthening or stretching exercises before cool down.

Home-based programmes made use of exercise bicycles, walking, cycling, jogging or swimming.

“There is good evidence that people experiencing fatigue from chronic auto-immune conditions can benefit from a range of non-medicinal interventions” concludes Dr Neill.

“Other effective strategies, apart from aerobic exercise, include health education and cognitive behavioural therapy.

“Cooling techniques and nutritional supplements such as acetyl-L-carnitine and fish oil showed a number of benefits, but need to be looked at in more detail.”

The authors suggest electro-magnetic field devices also warrant further investigation, due to promising results.

But they add that low-cost, low technology interventions that promote self-management of fatigue are probably more appropriate and feasible than those requiring specialised equipment or professional expertise.

They stress that any exercise programmes must be suitable for each individual and take account of issues that affect how people manage their conditions, like reduced mobility, pain, nausea and stress.

“Healthcare professionals should ask people about their fatigue and assess each person’s symptoms” adds Dr Neill. “People with fatigue should be encouraged to design their own exercise routines based on awareness of their individual fatigue patterns and daily priorities, while group activities must take account of the changing nature of fatigue over time.”

Previous research suggests that 70 per cent of people with multiple sclerosis suffer daily fatigue, 57 per cent of people with rheumatoid arthritis experience fatigue and 81 per cent of those with system lupus erythematosus find fatigue moderately to severely disabling.

“Any measures that can reduce people’s fatigue and improve their quality of life are to be welcomed. Our review shows that some interventions have great potential, particularly in the short term, but that more research is needed to measure their long-term effectiveness” says Dr Neill.

Source: Blackwell Publishing

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