

# Exercise could help prevent, treat eating disorders: study

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When treating an eating disorder, exercise is rarely considered therapeutic; it's more likely to be viewed as dangerous for patients already obsessed with their weight. But a new University of Florida study shows that the psychological benefits of exercise could be used as an intervention for — or even a way to prevent — eating disorders.

Despite the documented mental and physical benefits of [exercise](#), health care practitioners have long assumed that people with eating disorders shouldn't be encouraged to burn calories through physical activity. While it's true that compulsive exercisers risk further harm, healthy exercise that's not compulsive could help people with eating disorders or people who are at risk for eating disorders, said Heather Hausenblas, a UF exercise psychologist who co-authored the study, published in the January issue of *European Eating Disorders Review*.

“When it comes to eating disorders, exercise has always been seen as a negative because people use it as a way to control their weight. But for most people, exercise is a very positive thing,” Hausenblas said. “Our results show it's not necessarily bad for people with disordered eating to engage in exercise. The effects on self-esteem, depression, mood and body image can reduce the risk of eating pathologies.”

In the study, co-authored by Brian Cook, an exercise psychologist at the University of Kentucky, Peter Giacobbi, an assistant professor at the University of Arizona, and former UF doctoral student Daniel Tuccitto, Hausenblas and her colleagues surveyed 539 normal-weight students,

most of whom were not at risk for eating disorders. They evaluated the students' drive to be thin, along with their exercise habits and risk for exercise dependence, and used statistical models to find potential relationships. She found that, more than its physical benefits, the psychological effects of exercise could help prevent and treat eating disorders.

The study's findings could have far-reaching impact, said Danielle Symons Downs, director of the Exercise Psychology Laboratory at The Pennsylvania State University.

“The public health implications of this study are important,” she said. “This research is important for understanding the complex interactions between exercise behavior and eating pathology, and it can assist clinicians with better understanding how to intervene with and treat eating pathology.”

Beyond offering an affordable treatment to address the needs of people with eating disorders, exercise therapies also could help relieve the burden of such diseases on the health-care system, Hausenblas said. “If a patient is extremely underweight, you're not going to have them exercising two or three hours a day. But once they're at a stable level, exercise could have a big positive effect,” she said. Hausenblas hopes to launch another study that would follow at-risk individuals over a period of several months to see if exercise impacts their symptoms.

“We'd like to assess them over time, and we hope to see their risk factors go down,” she said.

Provided by University of Florida

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