

Prevention of mental disorders through physical activity

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Adults in the Community of Madrid who perform at high or mild levels of total physical activity present higher levels of mental health than those performing at low levels of physical activity. This is the result of a study conducted by researchers from Faculty of Sciences for Physical Activity (INEF) and Sport at Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM) in collaboration with the European University (UEM). They also found that the level of exercise performed in leisure time is inversely related to vulnerability to mental disorders.

These findings could be taken into account when developing policies and strategies to improve population health with more efficient use of health resources.

There is growing concern for deterioration of mental health, especially in societies with higher rates of financial development. Strategies to reduce the incidence of such diseases are increasingly needed. In this context, the team of researchers of UPM and UEM has conducted a study that reveals the existing relationship between physical activity and mental health in the population of Madrid.

In a population sampling of the Community of Madrid between 15 and 74 years old, researchers found that 15% suffered some type of mental disorder and 19.8% were inactive according to current recommendations. The aim of this research was to assess the possible link between physical activity and levels of mental health by analyzing whether such link changed in terms of physical activity (low, mild, high)

and the situation in which it was performed (work, commuting, [leisure time](#)). Finally, they also assessed if physical activity was associated with vulnerability to [mental disorders](#).

The methodology used by researchers in this study is more comprehensive than other methods used in previous studies. Specifically, they used the Global Physical Activity Questionnaire (version 2) to quantify the physical activity with data about intensity, frequency and length of the physical activities performed in different situations (work, commuting and leisure time). The General Health Questionnaire was used to measure the mental health status. This methodology detects psychological morbidity and possible cases of psychiatric disorders in contexts like primary care or general population.

Overall, results show that levels of mental health in Madrid vary according to the level of exercise in leisure time and the physical activity total (amount of physical activity at work or usual occupation, commuting and leisure time). Thus, people reported high or mild levels of total physical exercise showed better levels of mental health. Considering only the physical activity performed in leisure time, the risk of suffering mental health pathologies among the "sufficiently active" population (meaning those who perform high to mild levels of exercise) was reduced up to 56% or 54% compared to the "insufficiently active" population, depending of the level of physical activity, mild or high respectively.

Although this association between [physical activity](#) and mental health has been shown in previous studies, there still exist gaps in knowledge related to the mechanisms that regulate it. This will require further research.

Today, [mental health](#) problems associated with minor disorders are a significant health problem that consumes a large amount of resources in

both doctor appointments and medicines, besides being one of the main causes of medicalization of everyday life. Thus, to proactively tackle this problem through exercise could be useful for a more effective use of health resources. This matter should be taken into account when developing policies and strategies addressed to improve [population health](#).

More information: "Relationships between physical activity and mental health in the adult population of Madrid". *Revista de Psicología del Deporte*, 24 (2):233-239; 2015

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