

Could physical activity be good for alcohol and substance use disorders?

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A team of researchers from Plymouth University Peninsula Schools of Medicine and Dentistry and Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust, has received funding of £154,000 from the NIHR Research for Patient Benefit (RfPB) programme, to carry out a systematic review of research to see if and how physical activity and exercise could help those with alcohol and substance use disorders.

Alcohol and [substance use disorders](#) have health, social and economic consequences for a wide variety of people and organisations - from the individual with the disorder and their family, friends and carers, to employers and public services such as the NHS.

It is estimated that [alcohol misuse](#) and [substance misuse](#) cost the UK economy £21 billion (£3.5 billion in healthcare) and £15 billion (£488 million in healthcare) respectively. In the UK, one in five deaths of men aged 16 to 54 years are attributable to alcohol misuse and one in 10 adults aged 16 to 59 years have used illicit drugs in the past year.

The phenomenon of alcohol and substance misuse is addressed in many different ways from a variety of sources, such as counselling, group support, and drug therapies, but more ways are needed to help those who are most vulnerable or at risk.

Even solutions can cause a problem - drug treatments, for example, may lead to an addiction for the drug being used or unpleasant side effects.

The study is led by Dr. Tom Thompson, Research Fellow at Plymouth University Peninsula Schools of Medicine and Dentistry, who commented: "We wanted to investigate the evidence about [physical activity](#) in relation to these disorders because it could help in prevention, reduction, and treatment. It may be that physical activity diverts attention away from the addiction, helps to build confidence or improves mood, reduces withdrawal symptoms, and supports a shift towards a healthy identity which is incompatible with excessive alcohol or substance use. It is also possible those who engage in physical activity in their younger years are less likely to develop problems with alcohol and [substances](#) later in life. Compared with drug treatments and other therapies, physical activity has little or no bad side effects and is potentially cheap and easily accessible."

The research team will analyse the evidence from existing research, which in turn will lead to a better understanding of if and how physical activity could be used as a tool for prevention, reduction, and treatment.

Once the research team has findings, it will share them with health and social service providers, funders, service users and others to gain their views on what the best methods are and to whom they should be offered. The team will also estimate costs for using physical activity to address alcohol and substance use disorders.

The study will complete with a final report which will provide important practical information on what has worked so far, and what may be most effective in the future as an alternative approach to preventing and treating [alcohol](#) and substance use disorders.

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University, Plymouth Hospitals NHS Trust, Bristol University, Southampton University, King's College London, and Plymouth City Council.

Provided by University of Plymouth

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