Regular exercise reduces patient anxiety by 20 percent, study finds

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The anxiety that often accompanies a chronic illness can chip away at quality of life and make patients less likely to follow their treatment plan. But regular exercise can significantly reduce symptoms of anxiety, a new University of Georgia study shows.

In a study appearing in the Feb. 22 edition of the Archives of Internal Medicine, researchers analyzed the results of 40 randomized clinical trials involving nearly 3,000 patients with a variety of medical conditions. They found that, on average, patients who exercised regularly reported a 20 percent reduction in anxiety symptoms compared to those who did not exercise.

"Our findings add to the growing body of evidence that physical activities such as walking or weight lifting may turn out to be the best medicine that physicians can prescribe to help their patients feel less anxious," said lead author Matthew Herring, a doctoral student in the department of kinesiology, part of the UGA College of Education.

Herring pointed out that while the role of exercise in alleviating symptoms of depression has been well studied, the impact of regular exercise on anxiety symptoms has received less attention. The number of people living with chronic medical conditions is likely to increase as the population ages, he added, underscoring the need for a low-cost, effective treatment.

The researchers limited their analysis to randomized controlled trials,

which are the gold standard of clinical research, to ensure that only the highest quality data were used. The patients in the studies suffered from a variety of conditions, including heart disease, multiple sclerosis, cancer and chronic pain from arthritis. In 90 percent of the studies examined, the patients randomly assigned to exercise had fewer anxiety symptoms, such as feelings of worry, apprehension and nervousness, than the control group.

"We found that exercise seems to work with just about everybody under most situations," said study co-author Pat O'Connor, professor and co-director of the UGA Exercise Psychology Laboratory. "Exercise even helps people who are not very anxious to begin with become more calm."

Exercise sessions greater than 30 minutes were better at reducing anxiety than sessions of less than 30 minutes, the researchers found. But surprisingly, programs with a duration of between three and twelve weeks appear to be more effective at reducing anxiety than those lasting more than 12 weeks. The researchers noted that study participants were less likely to stick with the longer exercise programs, which suggests that better participation rates result in greater reductions in anxiety.

"Because not all study participants completed every exercise session, the effect of exercise on anxiety reported in our study may be underestimated," said study co-author Rod Dishman, also a professor of kinesiology. "Regardless, our work supports the use of exercise to treat a variety of physical and mental health conditions, with less risk of adverse events than medication."

Provided by University of Georgia

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