

ANXIETY & EXERCISE

PUBLIC

WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health condition worldwide (1). People with anxiety disorders experience persistent fear or worry that may start as feeling nervous but gets worse over time. Anxiety disorders may significantly impact day-to-day activities such as school, work, or family activities and can lead to relationship or financial strain. Symptoms of anxiety include restlessness, fatigue, irritability, poor sleep, or avoidance of certain situations (2). Anxiety disorders often co-exist with mood disorders such as depression, or with physical health complaints such as heart disease or diabetes (3, 4).

HOW DOES EXERCISE HELP?

Although medication or psychological treatments are often successfully used to help people with anxiety disorders, regular physical activity or exercise provides many additional benefits (5,6) such as:

- A lower risk of developing future anxiety disorders;
- A reduction in symptom severity;
- Augmented benefits of other treatments;
- Improved cardiovascular fitness.

WHAT EXERCISE IS BEST FOR PEOPLE WITH ANXIETY?

The optimal dose of exercise, based on the frequency, intensity, time, and type (FITT) principles has yet to be confirmed. Most studies have shown positive benefits from moderate intensity aerobic exercise, but resistance training may also offer benefits for some people with anxiety disorders. In general, exercise programs should progress toward or meet the public health guidelines of 150 minutes of moderate-vigorous intensity exercise accumulated across all or most days of the week. However, some key considerations for exercise prescription for people with anxiety disorders are outlined below: (7)

- To maximise engagement, exercise should be rewarding and enjoyable for the individual;
- Consider the previous experience and personal preferences of the individual;
- Use of a self-selected intensity, rather than a prescribed intensity may promote initiation and maintenance of exercise;
- Seek advice from a health professional before commencing an exercise program to ensure the choices are right for you.



HOW DO I COMMENCE AN EXERCISE PROGRAM?

Talk to your General Practitioner or other treating specialist about an exercise program that suits your personal preferences and circumstances. Alternatively, Accredited Exercise Physiologists, who are university-trained health professionals with expertise in the design and delivery of lifestyle interventions for people with chronic and complex conditions including anxiety, will be able to create an individualised exercise program that suits your needs. You may be able to claim a rebate from your health insurer for services provided by an Accredited Exercise Physiologist, or through Medicare if referred by your General Practitioner under a special referral plan.



RELATED INFORMATION AND REFERENCES

Exercise is Medicine Australia www.exerciseismedicine.org.au

Exercise Right www.exerciseright.com.au

Find an Accredited Exercise Physiologist www.essa.org.au

Find a Sport and Exercise Physician www.acsep.org.au

If you have any concerns about the safety of your patient in commencing an exercise program, please consider referral to a Sport and Exercise Physician.

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2. NIH. (2018). Anxiety disorders. Retrieved 3 February 2022, from: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders>
3. Saha, et al. (2021) Co-morbidity between mood and anxiety disorders: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Depression and Anxiety*. 38: 286- 306
4. Stanton, et al. (2019) Prevalence of chronic health conditions in Australian adults with depression and/or anxiety. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*. 40: 902-907.
5. Ramos-Sanchez, et al. (2021) The anxiolytic effects of exercise for people with anxiety and related disorders: An update of the available meta-analytic evidence. *Psychiatry Research*. 302: 114046.
6. Frederiksen, et al (2021). Physical exercise as an add-on treatment to cognitive behavioural therapy for anxiety: A systematic review. *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 49(5), 626-640.
7. Schuch, F. B., Stubbs, B., & Kandola, A. (2021). Physical activity and exercise for the prevention and management of anxiety. In Z. Zenko & L. Jones (Eds.), *Essentials of exercise and sport psychology: An open access textbook* (pp. 369-384). Society for Transparency, Openness, and Replication in Kinesiology.