



SUPPORTING THE HEALTH AND
WELLBEING OF THE ARMED
FORCES COMMUNITY AND
CIVILIAN FAMILIES IN
CORNWALL



EXERCISE IS MEDICINE

There are 3 factors that influence our health, genetics, environment and behaviour. Whilst science chips away at understanding the genome, produces vaccinations and educates us with regard to hygiene; it is in our behaviour that we have the most and easiest influence over our health.

However, more than 20 million people (11.8 million women and 8.3 million men) in the UK are inactive. The British Heart Foundation estimates that inactivity and the increased heart disease that results from it, costs the NHS £1.2 billion pounds each year. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-39457993>

“Exercise is medicine” is an expression coined in America. It describes a health programme that targets health issues before they become a problem, by encouraging a more active and healthier lifestyle. There are many benefits to this approach to health not least, that exercise, responsibly undertaken, has little or no financial cost and very few negative side effects.

Human beings are built to move and be physical. This is how we have evolved over millennia and our bodies are primed to use exercise to be both, self-regulating and to some extent self-medicating.

Harvard scientists have recently discovered that when you exercise, your muscles release natural substances that help relax blood vessel walls, lower blood pressure, reduce "bad" cholesterol, increase "good" cholesterol, move glucose out of the bloodstream and into the cells where it is needed, lower insulin levels, and reduce inflammation. All of these functions together help protect us against heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers.

There can be no doubt nowadays (due to the thousands of medical and scientific studies) that exercise at any age can enhance longevity, health, and wellbeing. Unfortunately, modern life encourages sedentary leisure activities such as watching TV, surfing on the internet, and playing computer games. Many people are discouraged from taking exercise by the idea that they have to join an expensive gym, wear Lycra, exercise for hours and hours and give up pizza, to be fit and healthy. In fact, none of these ideas are true.

Science suggests that to get positive health benefits we need to burn approximately 1000 calories a week doing physical exercise. This means that just 30 minutes of moderate physical activity a day (such as walking or swimming) can help you sidestep many life-limiting and life-ending problems such as,

- reducing your chances of getting heart disease. For those who already have heart disease, exercise reduces the chances of dying from it.
- lowering your risk of developing hypertension and diabetes.
- reducing your risk for colon cancer and some other forms of cancer.
- improving your mood and mental functioning.
- keeping your bones strong and joints healthy.
- helping you maintain a healthy weight.
- helping you maintain your independence well into your later years.

The positive by products of getting up from the sofa do not stop there. People who exercise; sleep better, are less stressed, are more positive and resilient, have better verbal memory and have an improved sex life.

There are four components to physical fitness, and each offers different health benefits:

1. **Aerobic** – This is activity that quickens your breathing. It aids cardio-vascular fitness, focusing on your heart, lungs, and circulation. The word ‘aerobic’ can strike fear into anyone who has ever heard the phrase “feel the burn” but this is a misconception. If you want to cycle or jog or indeed join an aerobics class that’s great but a brisk walk is also fine and will help you burn just as many calories. Aerobic activity also releases natural chemicals into your bloodstream to enhance your mood.
2. **Strength** – This is weight bearing exercise. It helps protect bones and bone density and builds and maintains muscular strength. Our bones weaken with age and can become brittle. Stronger muscles bolster and protect our bones. If you enjoy lifting weights, that’s great but doing normal exercise carrying/wearing small weights is also good. If that’s not your ‘thing’ then consider using resistance bands (big elastic bands) or use your own body as the weight you are bearing in activities such as Yoga and Pilates. For keen gardeners, digging the garden is a productive strength exercise. Know too the more muscle you have the more fat you burn when you exercise. Feeling strong and healthy has the psychological benefit of increasing self-esteem and personal power.
3. **Flexibility** – These are stretching exercises for posture and balance and to counteract muscle shortening. Our muscles shorten with age and this process can affect our skeleton. The combined affect results in; back, neck, shoulder and joint pain, tendonitis, and increased injuries. Stretching exercises elongate the fibres within muscles and the tendons surrounding them. Yoga is great for stretching but any moderate stretch exercise such as ‘warm up’ and ‘cool down’ stretches will also help. Stretching feels good and it’s very easy to do. You can start with a stretch as part of your early morning wake up and go from there.
4. **Balance** - We tend to take balance for granted but our ability to balance is very important and is unfortunately eroded over time. Poor balance results in poor posture, falls, a lack of poise and general clumsiness. Yoga, Pilates, and

Tai chi are all great for enhancing balance. Dance too can be good for balance, as well as a great way to socialise, learn new skills and have fun.

If you don't already exercise, NOW is the time to start. Don't put it off until you develop health problems. Develop the habit of exercise by either setting aside 30 minutes each day to be active or by attaching small bursts of activity to everyday routines. Remember to feel the reward after exercise or build in an additional reward. You can march whilst you mow the lawn or vacuum the carpet, balance whilst you wait for the kettle to boil etc.

If it helps, get an exercise ap or pedometer. If you prefer company and camaraderie, join a class or a group. If you can't perform moderate intensity exercise remember that light activity is good for your health too.

Write yourself a health prescription and remember "exercise is medicine".

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