Optimal Health University™

Presented by Dr. Troy H. Peters

Research Shows Aerobic Exercise Fends Off Chronic Pain

For years, people in chronic pain were told to "rest," "take it easy" or "stay off their feet." Not anymore. These days, they're being told to "get moving"!

Studies are confirming what chiropractors long ago learned from working with patients: The notion that people in pain should "take it easy" and avoid aerobic activity is a myth. In fact, scientists have discovered that the opposite is true: People with long-term (chronic) conditions heal faster when they engage in aerobic activity.

That said, Dr. Peters reminds patients to avoid overexerting themselves or engaging in activities that significantly aggravate their condition. It's important to start slowly and build up a workout regime custom-tailored for your individual needs. Talk to the doctor about what exercise protocol is right for you. In the meantime, read on to learn about how aerobic activity wards off a multitude of chronic disorders.

Banish Back Pain

A review by the renowned Cochrane Library finds that regular aerobic activity calms chronic low-back pain (LBP).

"We found that adults with chronic low-back pain had modest improvements in physical function and pain with exercise therapy," says lead investigator Jill Hayden, after examining 61 studies including more than 6,000 adults with LBP.

"The accumulated evidence supports a sea change that has occurred … , away from recommending prolonged bed rest and activity restriction," adds study co-author Michael Von Korff, Sc.D. (*Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2005;20:3).

Another report by investigators at the Division of Graduate Studies and Research at Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College in Toronto demonstrates that aerobic exercise is favorable in the management of chronic LBP.

The analysis enrolled 258 people with chronic LBP and an equal number of control subjects without chronic pain. Overall, patients with LBP had lower aerobic capacities compared with pain-free individuals. And, both groups had lower aerobic capacities than the general public. Some of the LBP patients completed a six-week exercise program. These patients "showed statistically significant improvement in percentile rank aerobic capacity, as well as statistically significant decreases in pain and disability scores." (*Arch Phys Med Rehabil* 2000;81:1457-63.)

Mitigate Migraines

A growing mountain of research links the long-term use of migraine medication to the development of more frequent chronic head pain, known as medication overuse headaches. That's just one reason why Dr. Peters encourages patients with migraines to avoid unnecessary medication.

Aerobic exercise may prevent migraine headaches, say scientists in Turkey who studied 40 patients suffering from the most common type of migraine headache.

The patients engaged in a six-week aerobic exercise regimen. "Exercise was found to have beneficial effects on all migraine parameters," write the study's authors (*Cephalalgia* 2003;23:972-6).

How does "sweating it out" quiet migraine pain? Release of the chemical endorphin may be key to exercise's migraine-fighting properties. In the study, plasma beta endorphin levels increased with exercise and were associated with a decrease in migraine episodes, especially in patients with lower levels at the start of the study.

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Adios to Arthritis Pain

Exercise prevents pain associated with osteoarthritis (OA), according to a report in the journal *Arthritis & Rheumatism*. Investigators pored over data from six studies on exercise and OA of the hip or knee. The researchers concluded that regular exercise — both aerobic and resistance training — cuts pain and disability in patients with OA.

In addition, physical activity bolstered subjects' quality of life and walking ability. This link was especially evident in patients with knee OA, say researchers (*Arthritis Rheum* 1999;42:1361-9).

Fend Off Fibromyalgia

Individuals with fibromyalgia often feel too tired to exercise. The trick, according to doctors of chiropractic, is to start extremely slowly and gradually build up. For instance, while many fibromyalgia sufferers are too exhausted for an extended power-walk, they may agree to a leisurely stroll around the block — or even just a few houses down the street and back. These "baby steps" build endurance, gradually increasing exercise time to an aerobic level for at least 30 minutes per day. Low-intensity aerobics, such as pool exercise classes, also lower drop-out rates among fibromyalgia patients.

Why is it so vital that people with fibromyalgia commit to developing an exercise regime? Because it can have a profound impact on recovery. In one analysis, 132 patients with fibromyalgia were randomly assigned to either aerobic exercise classes or relaxation classes twice weekly for 12 weeks.

Compared to relaxation, exercise led to significantly more participants rating themselves as "much better" or "very much better" after three months. Benefits were also maintained or improved one year later (*BMJ* 2002;325:185-7).

Another review, which pulled data on several studies on the advantages of aerobic exercise for fibromyalgia sufferers, concludes that regular aerobic activity may have a dramatic effect on quality of life among people with the disorder (*Curr Opin Rheumatol* 2005;17:190-4).

End Emotional Pain, Too

Aerobic exercise not only alleviates physical pain, but it may also put emotional distress to rest, according to a review article in the American Psychological Association's journal *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*.

Investigators sifted through research published since 1981 on the subject of mental illness and exercise.

The study revealed that exercise is a cost-effective — yet underused — therapy for clinical depression. In addition, the analysis suggested that physical activity diminishes the symptoms of schizophrenia, alcohol dependence and anxiety disorders (*Prof Psych* 1999;30(3):275-82).

A wealth of additional research confirms that regular aerobic exercise is more effective than antidepressant medication. For instance, one inquiry published in the *British Medical Journal* tracked 12 people with severe depression who walked on a treadmill for 30 minutes a day.

After a mere 10 days, six patients were substantially less depressed (including five for whom drug treatment had been largely unsuccessful), and two were slightly less depressed. Overall, clinically assessed depression scores fell by a third, and self-assessed scores fell by 25 percent (*BMJ* 2001;35:114-17).

"The observed outcomes indicate a clinical benefit not obtainable with currently available pharmacological treatments," conclude the study's authors.

Another investigation conducted by James A. Blumenthal, Ph.D. and colleagues at Duke University Medical Center in Durham, N.C., finds that exercise is more effective than commonly used antidepressant medication. The experiment followed 150 depressed individuals who participated in one of three treatments: 1) aerobic exercise on a treadmill or stationary bicycle for 30 minutes three times per week, 2) the antidepressant Zoloft® or 3) a combination of exercise and Zoloft®.

Zoloft® (sertraline) is a member of the class of drugs known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), which are commonly used antidepressants.

Treatment lasted for four months. Six months after the study ended, those who had been in the exercise group had significantly lower depression relapse rates than those in the medication or combination groups. Specifically, only 8 percent of patients in the exercise group had their depression return, while 38 percent of the drug-only group and 31 percent of the exercise-plus-drug group relapsed.

Why was the combination approach less effective than exercise alone? Dr. Blumenthal speculates that "simply taking a pill is very passive. Patients who exercised may have felt a greater sense of mastery over their condition and gained a greater sense of accomplishment."

We Tell Patients About Alternatives

One of the key factors that makes chiropractic — and this chiropractic practice in particular — unique is a commitment to remaining up to date on the latest research regarding natural alternatives for optimal wellness. Not only do we sift through the research, but we also share it with patients.

To this end, ***each week*** we present patients with a new ***Optimal Health University***® topic on late-breaking wellness research. In addition, we teach patients about prevention during office visits and in seminars. This educational component of the care we deliver sets chiropractic apart.