



Exercise effective in reducing symptoms of depression

Evidence in numbers



73 studies, 4985 participants, across 24 countries.

Authors' findings

- **Exercise is effective** for reducing symptoms of depression.
- People doing **moderate-intensity exercise** reported **larger benefits** when compared with those doing **either light or vigorous exercise**.
- **Unwanted side effects** from exercise **were not common**, and affected only **a small number of participants**.
- Exercise may **help people with depression feel better**, but its impact on overall **quality of life** is **not clear**.

Clegg AJ, Hill JE, Mullin DS, Harris C, Smith CJ, Lightbody CE, Dwan K, Cooney GM, Mead GE, Watkins CL. Exercise for depression. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2026, Issue 1. Art. No.: CD004366. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD004366.pub7. Accessed 11 June 2026.

The Evidence



Studies explored if exercise reduces symptoms of depression in adults, by comparing exercise with antidepressant medication and psychological therapy.



The effect of exercise on **quality of life** and any **unwanted side effects** was also studied.

Key messages



Exercise may be **moderately effective** when compared to **no therapy**.



Results are similar in reducing depressive symptoms by **exercise**, when compared to **psychological therapies** or **antidepressant treatments**.

About Cochrane South Africa

This Plain Language Summary was produced by Cochrane South Africa, at the South African Medical Research Council, which seeks to improve public health outcomes through producing, promoting, and translating high-quality evidence-based research.



For further information, contact the helpdesk at cochranesa@mrc.ac.za.