

Lifewire: A brisk walk is a step in the right direction

by Ven_Griva

Over the last decade medical science has found many health issues that can be eased, if not completely cured, by a daily constitutional.

Now a new study has added the reduction of stress and depression associated with the onset of menopause to those conditions already found to be relieved by regular brisk walks. The study was published in the January issue of *Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention*.

"With the aging population, physical activity represents one way for women to stay mentally healthy," said study author Deborah Nelson of Temple University in Philadelphia. "Physical activity can help throughout the menopausal transition and afterward."

For the study, researchers recruited and followed nearly 400 women from Philadelphia for eight years starting in 1996. The women reported their physical activity level and menopausal symptoms, including stress, anxiety, depression and hot flashes.

The average age at the beginning of the study was 42. Nearly half of the women were black, 58 percent reported more than a high school education, and 38 percent smoked cigarettes.

"We recruited African-American and Caucasian women living in Philadelphia for this study to better represent the large population of urban women," Nelson said. "These results can be generalizable to both urban postmenopausal Caucasian and African-American women, groups of women that have been under-represented in previous studies."

Researchers found that high levels of physical activity were most beneficial for relieving stress in pre-menopausal and black women.

The top tier of exercisers reported lower levels of perceived stress than those who did not exercise. These groups walked at a moderate pace, 4 mph, for 90 minutes at least five times a week.

While the study found mental benefits of exercise, it did not show that exercise reduced some physical symptoms.

"Physical symptoms like hot flashes will go away when you reach menopause, but mental health is something women still need to think about post-menopause," Nelson said.

The middle tier of exercisers walked five times a week for 40 minutes. The bottom group - considered the non-exercisers - walked for 15 minutes about five times a week.

All of the women were pre-menopausal at the start of the study. Eight years after enrollment, 20 percent of the women were menopausal and 18 percent were classified in the late transitional phase.

"In the urban setting, these women walked outside on city blocks or in shopping malls. ... It didn't require going to the gym," Nelson said. "You don't have to run 20 miles a week to reap the benefits of exercise. If you stick to a moderate-paced walking schedule, it can keep your body mass index down and lower the risk of stress, anxiety and depression."

DEPRESSION COCKTAIL

Depression and alcohol make a tenacious mix, says a new study concerning problem drinkers.

Researchers from the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs Medical Center measured the success of nearly 450 people who tried to quit drinking alcohol and stop smoking tobacco simultaneously. The study appears in the January edition of the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*.

At the start of the study, participants smoked at least five cigarettes a day and were alcohol dependent. Among the group, typical problem-drinking behaviors included repeatedly consuming more booze than planned, difficulty quitting or cutting down, and continuing to drink even though alcohol caused problems such as hangovers or sleeping difficulty.

All participants received intensive alcohol and smoking cessation treatment. Up to a year and a half after the start of the cessation program, researchers surveyed study participants and asked them about their alcohol and tobacco habits.

The survey found that participants had more success in giving up tobacco smoking than forgoing drink, and that depression was a key factor whether they were able to stop drinking.

"Among those who were depressed, the odds of drinking, the next time you checked in with them six months later, were 1.5 times greater than the odds of drinking for individuals without significant depressive symptoms," said lead author Molly Kodl. "With significant depression, people report mood that is down in the dumps, loss of interest in things they used to enjoy, low energy, appetite changes and difficulty concentrating."

While depression seems to make it harder to give up alcohol and remain sober, the study did not find a similar association for tobacco dependence.

"Depression did not significantly impact the odds of succeeding in quitting smoking in this study," Kodl said. "Our study suggests that treating depression may help people recover from alcohol use problems, although more research is needed on this topic."

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