

How Exercise Can Help With Addiction Recovery



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[Addiction](#) is a treatable health condition. But about 60% of people who seek help for a substance use disorder (SUD) will use [drugs](#) or [alcohol](#) again within a year. So researchers continue to search for new and effective ways to prevent relapse.

There's growing evidence that [exercise](#) can be a powerful tool in your recovery.

Benefits of Exercise

Experts think regular [physical activity](#) can act as a healthy stand-in for addictive substances. That's because exercise and drugs of misuse work on similar parts of [your brain](#). They both activate your reward pathway, which triggers the release of feel-good chemicals like serotonin and [dopamine](#).

We need more research to know exactly how exercise affects addiction. But studies show it might:

Ease withdrawal. Regular exercise can lessen [anxiety](#), [depression](#), and [stress](#). These are common symptoms you might get during recovery that can lead to relapse.

Curb cravings. You can get a really strong urge to use drugs when you try to avoid them. Exercise can distract you from cravings or make them less powerful.

Replace your triggers. A new exercise routine can give you something to do and build your social network. This might help you avoid people, places, or things that remind you of drugs.

Help you think clearly. Regular physical activity can help your mind work better. Your odds of relapse might go down when your thoughts are more stable.

Improve your [sleep](#). If you have SUD, it's common to get [insomnia](#) when you try to avoid drugs or alcohol. Regular exercise might help you fall asleep faster and get better quality rest at night.

Boost your self-esteem and self-control. It's easier to manage stressful stuff when you feel good about yourself.

Exercises That Can Help

Early research shows [aerobic exercise](#) and resistance training might help with addiction recovery. But right now, there's not enough evidence to say that one kind of physical activity is better than another. Future studies should help us learn more.

Aerobic, or cardio, exercises get your [heart rate](#) up for a sustained period. That includes:

- Walking
- [Running](#)
- [Swimming](#)
- Boxing
- Hiking
- Light gardening
- Dancing
- [Water](#) aerobics

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Resistance, or strength-training, exercises work your muscles. Examples include:

- Some kinds of [yoga](#)
- Weightlifting
- Push-ups or sit-ups
- Squats or lunges

- Heavy gardening, such as digging

Set up an exercise routine early in your substance use treatment. If you're not sure where to start, talk to your doctor or substance use counselor about how to get active. You can also reach out to recovery groups in your area. They might have an exercise program you can join.

How Much Should You Exercise?

Experts don't know what "dose" is the most helpful. Until we know more, you can aim for the same amount of physical activity as everyone else. That's at least 150 minutes of moderate or 75 minutes of intense exercise every week. Add strength-training twice a week.

You might want to break up your exercise sessions into 30-minute blocks each day, five times a week. And it's OK to start slow. Any exercise is better than none. Studies show as little as 5 minutes of physical activity can protect you against cravings.

Can You Exercise Too Much?

Regular physical activity is safe for most people. But it's possible to overdo it or crave exercise in a similar way as drugs and alcohol. There's evidence that this is more likely to happen to people who have another

addiction. But we need more research to know if it's really something that affects people with SUD more the general public.

You should tell your doctor if you start to exercise in an unhealthy way. Too much physical activity can raise your odds of injury, anxiety, [depression](#), and social problems.