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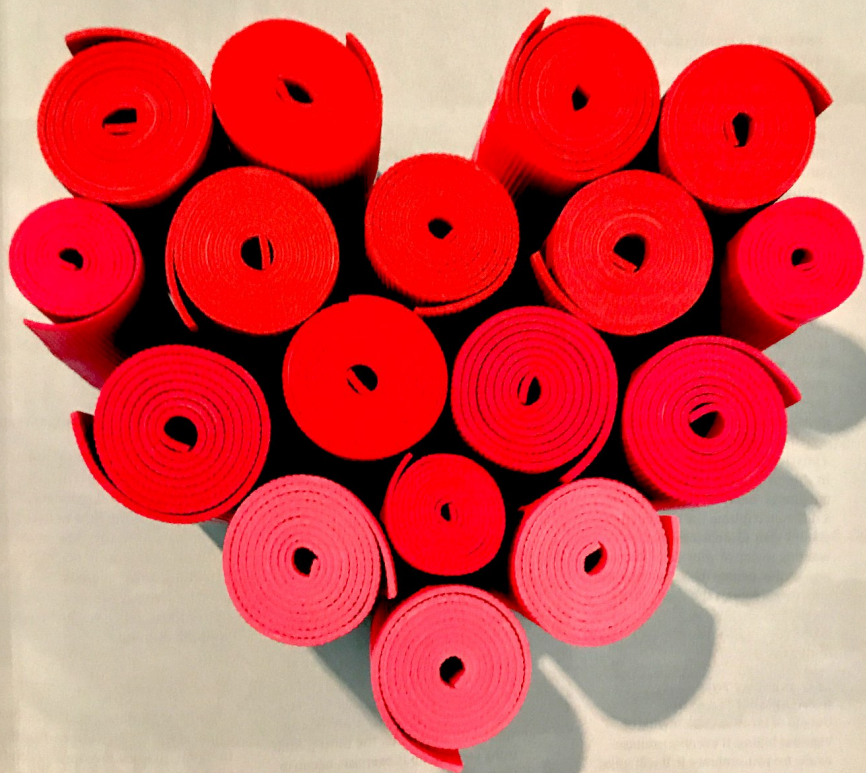
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balance



The Exercise Fix

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY CAN BE AS EFFECTIVE AS MEDS
AT EASING CERTAIN HEALTH PROBLEMS—ESPECIALLY IF
YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHAT WORKOUT IS BEST.

By Jessica Migala

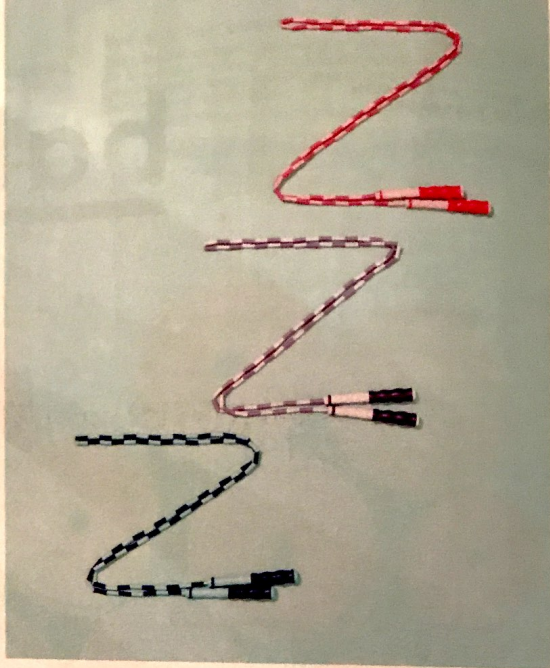
EXERCISE IS MEDICINE. If you moved your body today, you delivered a powerful dose of pain-relieving, sleep-inducing, blood-sugar-regulating, natural drugs to your muscles, heart, and brain. Of course, there's no substitute for pharmacology in some situations, but exercise can be a miracle cure. Here's to breaking a sweat—and reaping the benefits.

Sleep Better

One reason to get off the couch today: a better snooze tonight. "Physical activity improves your ability to regulate your mood and lowers anxiety levels, which can cause insomnia," says Michael T. Smith Jr., PhD, a sleep expert at Johns Hopkins Medicine in Baltimore. "Some studies of brain activity show that exercise may create a physiological need for deeper sleep." In short, you wake up refreshed—not groggy. Exercise can also make a difference during the day, helping you hit your to-do list instead of wanting to nap at your desk. Research reveals that people who meet physical-activity guidelines (150 minutes a week of moderate-intensity exercise) are 35 percent less likely to feel sleepy during the day.

BEST EXERCISE FOR SLEEP: HIGH-INTENSITY CARDIO

Get out of breath—think rowing or vigorous biking. If evening exercise works for you, embrace it. It will spike your core body temperature, and the subsequent cooldown can promote deeper sleep, says Smith. Aim to finish exercising two hours before bed.



Manage Cholesterol

The thinking used to be that you should lower your total cholesterol, but doctors now look at the two types, HDL and LDL, in different ways. When it comes to HDL, the higher the better; for LDL, the lower the better, explains Suzanne Steinbaum, DO, director of women's cardiovascular prevention, health, and wellness at Mount Sinai Heart in New York City. As you age, your estrogen levels decline, and so does your HDL cholesterol, leaving your heart vulnerable to damage. To get your numbers in check, start moving. "Research shows that the most potent thing you can do is exercise, because it improves the function of HDL. We don't have a drug that does that and helps provide better outcomes for heart disease and stroke," says Steinbaum. "Exercise is better than medication." And it pays off: For every 1 percent your HDL increases by, your heart disease risk decreases by 3 percent, notes Steinbaum.

BEST EXERCISE FOR CHOLESTEROL: CARDIO + STRENGTH

A regimen involving both cardio and strength training is ideal for increasing HDL and reducing LDL in people who are healthy or have high cholesterol, according to a review in the journal *Sports Medicine*. Try to get a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate exercise five days a week; at least two of those sessions should include strength training.

Alleviate PMS

Cramps, moodiness, and exhaustion. The last thing you want to do is omit the gym, thanks. But dress in comfy clothes and go—you'll feel better. "It's a well-known phenomenon that exercise releases feel-good chemicals in the brain called endorphins," says

"Our bodies are made to move. Physical activity helps lubricate the disks in the spine and improves nerve, muscle, and joint functions that play a role in back health."

Alyssa Dweck, MD, a gynecologist and assistant clinical professor of ob-gyn at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York City. Endorphins are responsible for the famous "runner's high," and they're a source of natural pain relievers that target cramps. Another perk: Physical activity may lessen your flow. To prevent and treat discomfort, Dweck recommends exercising regularly and ramping it up a couple of days before you expect your period to arrive. Use a period-tracking app and set an alert to ping you to make a date with the gym. This will feel easier each month.

BEST EXERCISE FOR PMS: CARDIO OR YOGA

Cardio workouts are very effective at flooding the body with endorphins, though many other kinds of exercise also release them, says Dweck. If you want gentler movement, roll out your yoga mat. Fifteen studies concluded that yoga may help reduce PMS, according to a review in the *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. The mind-body practice can calm your nervous system's stress response—that's helpful, since stress is known to worsen cramps. Yoga may also improve pain tolerance and leave you with a greater sense of well-being, something you could use right now.

Relieve Back Pain

You can't figure out what happened (are you sleeping funny? Is it all that sitting or standing at work?), but your back is sore and stiff, and it's not getting better. All you want to do is lie down and flip on Netflix. Up to 80 percent of adults will experience lower-back pain at some point in their lives, and it's one of the most common reasons people head to the doctor and stay home from work. However, while only a qualified health care practitioner can tell you the best course of action for treating your pain, "sometimes the solution is not to rest," says Nick Licameli, a physical therapist at Professional Physical Therapy in Nutley, New Jersey. Pain medications, like opioids, aren't necessarily the solution either. "Our bodies are made to move. Physical activity helps lubricate the disks in the spine and improves nerve, muscle, and joint functions that play a role in back health," says Licameli. In many cases, you can't couch-potato your way out of pain—doing so may prolong it.

BEST EXERCISE FOR BACK PAIN: CARDIO + STRENGTH + FLEXIBILITY

To ease the aches, you need an all-around routine. A U.K. research review analyzing the best type of exercise to treat back pain concluded that a three-pronged approach gets patients feeling better fastest. Cardio boosts healing blood flow to the soft tissues in the back and releases endorphins. Strength work that challenges the core builds muscles