

BODY & MIND



UNDER PRESSURE
Weightlifting and rowing can help reduce the risk of fractures

An exercise plan that builds up your bones

Different activities can have a marked effect on bone health, reports

Claire Coleman

We're constantly told that we need to stay active throughout our lives. Regular exercise is, of course, associated with lower incidences of cardiovascular disease, certain cancers, diabetes and also osteoporosis. But all exercise is not created equal – as research recently carried out for the BBC television programme *Trust Me, I'm a Doctor* showed. To find out how different types of exercise might affect bone density, Dr Karen Hind, a researcher in bone physiology and health at Leeds Beckett University, asked elite cricketers, gymnasts and cyclists to undergo tests to measure their bone density. The results

were staggering. The gymnasts showed bone density that was between 11.5 and 16.5 per cent higher than average, the cricketers' scores were 18.5 to 20 per cent higher than average, but the bone density of the cyclists was 1.5 to 5.5 per cent lower than average.

It seems that the very exercise that many take up to protect their joints, could actually be damaging bones.

So why do different types of exercise have such different effects on bones? "We build up our bones until about the end of our 20s," explains Sarah Leyland, a nurse consultant who works with the National Osteoporosis Society. "But throughout our lives, the cells within our bones are constantly renewing and remodelling and exercise that causes the muscle to pull on the bone, basically giving the bone work to do, helps to promote this."

She adds that for a muscle to pull on the bone, you either need to have your body weight pulling on the skeleton – which happens when you're jogging, jumping or skipping – or be doing some form of resistance exercise, such as rowing. All this is worrying for those who turn to swimming and cycling to stay fit and protect their joints.

"We're not saying cycling and swimming are not important," says Leyland, "but as they're not weight-bearing, they shouldn't be the only thing you do."

FIVE GREAT ACTIVITIES FOR IMPROVING BONE DENSITY

DANCING
Ballroom, Zumba, whatever takes your fancy. "Older people need to improve balance and muscle strength so they reduce the risk of falling over – most fractures in older age are the result of a fall," says Leyland. "Something like dancing which will work on all these aspects is ideal."

HIGH INTENSITY INTERVAL TRAINING (HIIT)
"Dynamic bursts of exercise that put different types of force through the muscles seem to be good," says Leyland. "So a circuit training class that includes exercises such as skipping and press-ups would be a good option."

ROWING
Even if you're nowhere near a river,

OTHER FACTORS THAT CAN HELP – OR HINDER – BONE STRENGTH

SMOKING
Research published in *The BMJ* concluded that by the age of 80, smokers have six per cent lower bone density than non-smokers and are 71 per cent more likely to fracture a hip.

DIET
"A healthy balanced diet is usually recommended, including enough protein as low levels of protein seem to increase the risk of hip fracture," says Leyland. It's also worth avoiding excessive alcohol consumption as this is associated

with increased fracture risk.

SUNLIGHT
Because the body needs sunlight to manufacture vitamin D, it's possible that some people, usually those with darker skin, might not get enough in the UK during winter. If so, a vitamin D supplement might be appropriate. "But a supplement isn't going to 'fix' your bone density if other aspects of your lifestyle are lacking," says Leyland.

MEDICATION
"Some medications, such as corticosteroids and breast cancer treatments, can affect bones," says Leyland. "It's possible to take supplementary medication to mitigate this."

hop on a machine in the gym. "Rowing gives a strong pull through the muscles around the spine and, as the spine is one of the areas where people with osteoporosis are likely to experience a fracture, any exercise that will boost bone health in this area is helpful."

WEIGHTS
People who are concerned about their joints can still look at muscle resistance exercises. "As long as they're taught how to do so safely and are using appropriate weights, anyone can lift weights, or use machines in the gym that will put an appropriate amount of strain on their muscles and bones," says Leyland.

TENNIS
Member of a tennis club? Good news – the bursts of speed and movement involved in tennis make it a great sport for building bone density. Research has shown that professional tennis players have higher bone density in their serving arm than their non-serving arm.

For more information about osteoporosis and exercise, go to nos.org.uk or contact its nurse-led helpline on 0808 800 0035



HOW NOT TO DIE (YET)

Dr Phil Hammond's guide to living longer
PRESCRIBING ANTIDEPRESSANTS

"The drugs do work: antidepressants should be given to a million more Britons, largely ever review claims." So reported *The Daily Telegraph*, wrongly. Researchers conducted a huge systematic review of trials of antidepressants, finding that all 21 studied worked better than a placebo. The effects of the drugs were "mostly modest".

The results were reported after eight weeks of treatment, so we don't know if they apply to long-term use. Not all the trials were high quality and there was no information about specific side effects of treatment or withdrawal symptoms. So why did it get widespread publicity?

A previous review suggested antidepressants work no better than placebos, so it's good to have new evidence to suggest they can work if you have acute major depressive disorder,

It's useful to have a wide range but I flinch at reading any drug 'should' be given

rather than milder symptoms for which cognitive behavioural therapy is the first-line treatment.

No drug works for all patients, so it's useful to have a wide range, but I flinch at reading any drug "should" be given to a million more Britons, and the review didn't claim this. I've seen many patients with severe depression whose lives have been saved by drugs, and some for whom the side effects were worse than their depression. We've yet to understand how individual drugs work for individual humans.

Depression is a horrible illness, and any drug that works for you is worth taking. But if a drug isn't working after four weeks, or is making you feel worse, don't suffer in silence.

Dr Phil Hammond is an author, stand-up comedian and NHS doctor. Tour dates at drphilhammond.com



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