

Exercise Reduces Anxiety of Chronic Disease

By [Rachael Rettner](#), LiveScience February 22, 2010 04:03 pm ET

Exercise may benefit the mental well-being of those with chronic illnesses such as heart disease and cancer, a new study suggests.

The results show that patients who participated in [exercise](#) training programs reported, on average, a 20 percent reduction in their anxiety symptoms compared to those who did not exercise.

Such feelings of worry and nervousness are common among patients with [chronic diseases](#) and may decrease their quality of life and make them less likely to stick to treatment plans, the researchers say. However, the study indicates that exercise may offer a way to treat [anxiety](#) without using prescription drugs that may cause adverse side effects, they say.

"Our findings add to the growing body of evidence that physical activities such as walking or weightlifting may turn out to be the best medicine that physicians can prescribe to help their patients feel less anxious," said study-author Matthew Herring, a doctoral student in the department of kinesiology at the University of Georgia.

Low-cost and effective treatments for anxiety will become even more necessary with an increasingly aging population, Herring said.

While much research has focused on the role of exercise in alleviating [depression](#) symptoms, comparatively few studies have specifically examined the effect of exercise on anxiety, according to Herring.

Herring and his colleagues analyzed the results of 40 so-called "randomized clinical trials," a type of study that is often looked upon as providing the highest quality research evidence. The studies involved nearly 3,000 patients with chronic conditions, including heart disease, cancer, multiple sclerosis and chronic arthritis pain.

The largest reductions in anxiety were seen in patients who exercised for more than 30 minutes during a single session.

In terms of the entire program length, shorter programs, around three to 12 weeks, were actually found to be more effective than longer ones at decreasing anxiety symptoms. The researchers speculate this result may be due to the tendency for patients not to follow through with longer training programs. "Better participation rates likely will result in greater anxiety reductions," Herring told LiveScience in an email.

The researchers note that many of the reviewed studies did not include sufficient information on how well participants adhered to their exercise program, or whether they were taking other medications, which may have influenced the study's results. Future studies should address these shortcomings to better understand how much exercise is needed to decrease anxiety, the researchers say. In addition, research should include "understudied" diseases, such as lupus and epilepsy, and examine the effects of exercises that are perhaps not as widely used, such as resistant training, they say.

