

# Is what I believe about exercise actually true?

## Exercise Myths and Facts Information



Physiotherapy Eating Disorder  
Professional Network

Any exercise or physical activity that is closely linked to an eating disorder can often start or be maintained through common rules, assumptions or beliefs about exercise and the body. These might be the perceived benefits of exercise, how, when and why to exercise, and what might happen if exercising stops. However, are these beliefs, or assumptions, true? Are they helpful or powerful maintaining factors for an eating disorder? This leaflet provides information on common ideas and thoughts that might lead to an increased drive or urge to be active or an inability to stop or reduce exercise. The information might help you work through which beliefs are true and challenge those which are actually common exercise myths and therefore unhelpful.

*“All body fat is unhealthy so I need to exercise to reduce it”*

This is a MYTH: Fat tissue is an essential part of the body. It is important to remember that as well as being a vital fuel for the body, body-fat also performs a number of essential functions in the body, including protecting internal organs, allowing the brain and heart function effectively, in the production and regulation of hormones, and providing the body with insulation to prevent heat loss, and support to prevent pressure sores.

*“Exercise can help lift my mood”*

This is a FACT: It is widely known that exercise can have a positive influence on mental health. For example, many individuals find that physical activity and exercise help to improve mood, due to the release of hormones, known as endorphins. However, remember that this can potentially be problematic if exercise is used to avoid emotions or manage anxiety, or if it becomes the only way someone can regulate mood and manage emotions. It is important to identify whether mood is enhanced because the exercise is fueling eating disorder thoughts and used as a coping strategy. The aim is to make exercise fun, social and enjoyable, and in doing so this can bring many positive and healthy benefits to mental health.

*“If my muscles don’t hurt after my workout then I haven’t worked hard enough”*

This is a MYTH: The body’s pain response is there for a reason and it is important to know the difference between pain and discomfort. Just because muscles don’t hurt after exercise does not mean that it has been ineffective, or ‘not hard enough’. Depending on the type and newness of exercise mild discomfort may develop in the 48 hours proceeding exercise, however pain needs to be listened to and could be a warning that the body cannot withstand the demand that is being placed on it and continuing exercise in that way increases the risk of injury.



This also links with the widely used statements *“no pain, no gain”* and *“feel the burn”*

It is vital, when exercising, to listen to the body and what it is telling you.

*“Walking to or around the shops is still exercise”*



This is a FACT: Physical activity encompasses a wider variety of activities which result in body movement and are all classed as exercise, irrespective of style, purpose or intensity. Walking to the shops is categorised as ‘incidental exercise’ where the primary reason for the activity is to complete a task, but can have the same effects on the body as structured exercise, such as improved muscle strength, improved cardiovascular function and improved mood. When considering daily exercise and activity levels it is therefore important to

take into account an accumulation of all incidental and structured exercise.

*“There are exercise guidelines that I need to adhere to in order to be healthy”*

This is partly TRUE. There are guidelines that relate to the amount of physical activity and exercise that is recommended at different stages of life, that are shown to result in benefits to both physical and mental health. However, it is important to remember that these guidelines are not individual prescriptions and what is recommended for one person might not be appropriate for someone else. It is vital to ensure that the amount, intensity and style of exercise or physical activity that is carried out is appropriate to one’s individual physical health, medical risks and psychological relationship with exercise.

Also, remember that if listening to recommendations for exercise such as ‘10,000 steps’ per day, that this amount of activity could actually be more harmful than helpful to both physical and mental health, and can lead to increased obsessional behaviour with exercise rules and patterns.

*“The more active I am the better”*

*“I have to exercise everyday”*

These are definitely not true. There is a wealth of information, advice and guidance on incorporating physical activity into daily lifestyle and the many benefits it can bring. For many individuals the amount and type of exercise will vary, and will be dependent on many lifestyle factors such as occupational and leisure activities, as well as an individual’s physical and mental health.



However, the body still needs rest. Following physical activity or exercise the body needs a period of rest and recovery—allowing it to work through it’s natural physiological processes to rebuild muscle tissue broken down during exercise. To do this it needs **rest and nutrition**. Without these two factors muscles will accumulate stress and fatigue —and exercise will have the opposite outcome from what was intended. The priority for anyone engaging in physical activity or exercise is to find the right balance with activity and rest. Being too active can shift the balance meaning that the benefits of exercise are outweighed by the risk and health consequences—and it is important to remember that these can be both physical as well as psychological consequences.

*“I am fit therefore I must be healthy”*

*“The thinner I am the fitter my body will be”*

These are also exercise MYTHS: Fitness refers to the efficiency of the body during aerobic activity, and therefore relates predominantly to the cardiovascular system. Being thin is not an indication as to how effectively the heart and lungs function, and active people, or those who engage in structured exercise often have a good level of fitness, but may still be overweight and/or eat an unbalanced/unhealthy diet. For example, sumo wrestlers are fit, but have excess fat and associated strain placed on the body. It is also important to remember that many athletes over-train, and this is not healthy, despite having a good level of fitness. Female athletes who maintain a high level of fitness alongside a low body weight are at high risk of not menstruating and developing reduced bone health.

Remember that the body’s primary fuel for aerobic activity and exercise is fat and therefore there is a point at which becoming thinner will negatively impact on fitness/performance.

This is a MYTH: Muscle tissue and fat tissue are two separate structures, one cannot convert to the other and therefore just because a muscle isn’t used at the same level as before does not mean it will convert to fat. A muscle that is not placed under as much demand from exercise may appear less defined, or less toned, but it will not have converted to a different tissue structure.

*“My muscles will turn into fat tissue if I do not use them”*

**For further guidance on managing exercise and activity or to discuss any of these myths and facts further then speak to a Physiotherapist or other Health Care Professional.**

*Kate Brown, Physiotherapist, September 2020*