



Can exercise help to treat depression?

This was the question that the TREAD study set out to answer. It is widely believed by both lay people and experts that exercise will help to pull us out of depression. This research tested that view.

People with a new episode of depression were recruited for the trial from general practices in Bristol and Exeter (one of which was St Leonard's Practice). The study included people aged 18 to 69 if they were willing and able to participate fully. Their depression could be mild, moderate or severe.

The volunteers were placed into one of two groups at random. One group was given the normal treatment for depression by their GP. The other group also received normal treatment for depression but they were encouraged to increase their physical activity as well. The encouragement was provided by a *physical activity facilitator*. The facilitator had the job of inspiring and encouraging the group members to exercise and keep at it. The facilitator met up with people at regular intervals and also kept in touch by telephone.

The study team carefully monitored both groups of people with depression for 12 months. At regular intervals, people were asked to complete questionnaires designed to show how depressed they were. They also filled in a diary of their physical activity levels; some people wore an activity monitor for a week so that the researchers could check that the diary was accurate.

The results showed that the outcomes for both groups were similar. Having help from a physical activity facilitator as well as normal GP treatment did not relieve the symptoms of depression any better than normal GP treatment on its own. However, many people in the 'exercise group' did manage to increase their physical activity and kept up their new level of activity.

This is an important study. We think of doctors spending their time on physical illness but depression is one of the most common reasons for seeing a GP. Ruling out treatments that do not work is important. It saves wasted effort and points researchers towards areas that may have greater benefits.

In itself, exercise has many other health benefits and the research team encourage us all to keep it up, whether we are depressed or not.

Many thanks to all of the patients at this Practice who took part in the TREAD study.

The full report appeared in the *British Medical Journal* on 6 June 2012. It is called, **Facilitated physical activity as a treatment for depressed adults: randomised controlled trial.**