

WHY CYCLING MAKES YOU HAPPY

JUNE 16, 2017 by JONATHAN SHARPE

Getting on our bike always makes us feel happier, even when it's wet, cold or dark outside. There's something about a spin of the pedals that always lifts our mood.



There's scientific evidence for the exercise-makes-us-happier theory, too. A 2010 study from the American College of Sports Medicine showed that just one 30-minute exercise session can boost your mood and tackle depression.

The study, published in *Medicine & Science in Sports and Exercise*, took 40 participants, all of whom had been recently diagnosed with depressive disorders but were not taking any form of antidepressant medication, and divided them into two groups: a control group that rested for 30 minutes and an exercise group that walked on a treadmill for 30 minutes.

The participants were asked to complete written surveys before their rest or exercise and at regular intervals afterwards, and the results showed that although both groups reported fewer feelings of negativity afterwards (tension, depression, anger, fatigue), only the exercise group expressed increased good feelings such as 'vigour' or 'well-being'.



If walking for 30 minutes can act as a method for managing feelings of depression, completely free from prescribed medication, in people with diagnosed depression who aren't necessarily cyclists, the principles can surely be applied to our kind, too. After all, if low-to-moderate-intensity exercise is all that's needed to give yourself a boost, imagine the benefits that cyclists can get from intense exercise, such as 30 minutes of pedalling hard.

Exactly how exercise boosts your mood is a little more complex, though there is plenty of science to back it up. It comes down to heightened production of chemicals in the brain that help to keep you happy, such as serotonin, dopamine and phenylethylamine. Not only this, but exercise releases growth hormones that increase the supply of blood and oxygen to the brain, stimulating the release of powerful mood-enhancing endorphins. These chemical messengers can create euphoria and pain relief that is stronger than that produced by morphine.

Alongside the psychological and emotional benefits of exercise, also remember that it can boost confidence by helping you get into shape and meet exercise goals, it can take your mind off worries, increase social interaction – with like-minded cyclists – and help you feel more in control. Do you really need any more reasons to get on your bike?

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Happy chemicals – and how to get more of them

Studies have isolated the chemicals affected by exercise that can put us in a better mood, but what are they and how can you boost your intake?

Serotonin

Serotonin is the mood neurotransmitter which keeps us emotionally and socially stable. Levels rise during exercise, boosting self-confidence and positive feelings.

Serotonin is produced from tryptophan that is found in bananas, granola, cottage cheese, duck, turkey, chicken, oats, seeds, pasta and baked potatoes, and vitamins B6 and B12

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which are found in oily **fish** like salmon, trout, herring and mackerel.

Dopamine

Dopamine is a major feel-good neurotransmitter, essential to helping us feel energised and motivated. One study into how exercise alters the activity of dopamine found that after 12 weeks of endurance or interval-based training the activity of dopamine receptors in the brain increased, meaning the production of feelings of motivation were also amplified.

Protein-rich foods such as meat, milk, **fish**, beans and soya beans help produce dopamine, as do theobromine and phenylethylamine, both found in chocolate.

Phenylethylamine

Phenylethylamine is a naturally occurring neurotransmitting chemical found in the brain. It occurs through the microbial fermenting of food and works as a mood-enhancing stimulant that aids the production of dopamine. It raises blood pressure and blood glucose levels which make us feel more alert and content.

Foods such as yellow cheeses, citrus fruits, red wine and chocolate are good sources of phenylethylamine, giving you a great excuse to indulge yourself (a little).

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