

ADULT ADHD IN DAILY LIFE · 8.8

ADHD and Exercise: What the Brain Actually Gets Out of Movement

Exercise has a real, modest effect on ADHD-relevant cognition and a real, modest effect on the comorbidities ADHD travels with. It is not a substitute for medication; it is a useful adjunct, and the acute post-exercise window is one of the more reliable tools available.

FOR

Adults with ADHD

AUDIENCE AGE

18+

REVIEWED

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PART OF

The NeuroFX resource library

IN SUMMARY

ADHD and Exercise: What the Brain Actually Gets Out of Movement

What the evidence shows

- **Acute effects after exercise are reasonably well-supported.** Improved sustained attention, working memory, response inhibition and mood for a window of minutes to hours after moderate-intensity aerobic exercise. The 2017 Den Heijer et al. review pulled this picture together for children and adults with ADHD.
- **Chronic effects are smaller and more variable.** Regular exercise programmes show small-to-moderate improvements in attention and hyperactivity (Cerrillo-Urbina meta-analysis in paediatric samples). The effect size is well below stimulant medication. Exercise is an adjunct, not a substitute.
- **The wider health and comorbidity benefits are real.** Anxiety, depression, sleep difficulty and cardiovascular risk all respond to regular exercise. ADHD travels with all of these, so the indirect benefits are part of the picture.

Why movement helps the ADHD brain

- **Aerobic exercise drives short-term rises in dopamine and noradrenaline.** The same neurotransmitter systems that stimulant medication acts on, by a different route. The systems exercise transiently boosts are the systems most underactive in ADHD attention regulation.
- **The post-exercise window is genuinely sharper.** Hard cognitive tasks scheduled into that window often go better. For stimulant users, morning exercise interacts well with medication onset; the rise in arousal and the medication onset stack rather than fight.
- **Mixed-modality activities may add more than steady cardio.** Martial arts, climbing, dance, racket sports and team sports combine aerobic load with skill and decision-making. The literature here is still developing but the executive function load is harder to argue with than pure steady-state cardio.

How to build a habit that holds up

- **Lower the friction at the start.** Kit laid out the night before. Trainers by the door. Class booked and paid for. Friend you have agreed to meet. Most exercise failures are at the initiation, not at the activity.
- **Use external structure.** Booked classes, training partners, teams, coaches, regular dog walks. The structure substitutes for the internal motivation that does not show up reliably.
- **Match exercise to your energy window.** A 6am gym session for an evening chronotype rarely survives. Working with your chronotype beats fighting it. If your good window is the morning, exercise in the morning.
- **Absorb missed days.** Treat a missed day as one missed day, not the end of the habit. The long-run return rate matters more than the streak. Most habits that survive a year have several three-day gaps in them.
- **Use the post-exercise window deliberately.** If you have a hard task, schedule it for the hour after exercise. This is one of the more reliable ADHD-specific applications of exercise. The window is real; do not waste it.

WHEN TO SPEAK TO A PROFESSIONAL

Speak to your GP before starting a new exercise programme if you have significant cardiovascular or musculoskeletal concerns; this is general advice, not ADHD-specific. Where ADHD has not been formally assessed and is being significantly affected, private adult ADHD assessment with a CQC-registered provider is a legitimate parallel route. Seek urgent help via 111, 999 or A&E for any acute mental health crisis or significant safety concern.

SOURCES

Cerrillo-Urbina et al. 2015 (Child Care Health Dev); Den Heijer et al. 2017 (J Neural Transm); Faraone consensus 2021; UK CMO Physical Activity Guidelines 2019; NICE NG87

NEXT STEPS**Speak to NeuroFX**

Private ADHD and autism assessment for adults and children aged 6 and upwards.
CQC-registered. Bedford Consulting Rooms, 4 Goldington Road, Bedford MK40 3NF.

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