

Physical health and mental illness

Having a mental illness can make it more challenging to stay physically healthy.

Some of the reasons for this are:

- the symptoms of a mental illness can make it harder to exercise, eat well or give up smoking
- certain medications can have side effects that cause physical health problems
- health professionals sometimes focus on a person's mental health, rather than their physical health
- genetic risk factors (certain genes can make it more likely that a person goes on to develop mental illness. These same genes may also play a part in physical health issues).

There are some things you can do to give yourself the best chance of staying physically well.

Helping yourself

Know what to look out for

People living with a serious mental illness (for example schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or severe depression) are more likely to have:

- weight problems
- high blood pressure
- heart problems
- problems with teeth and gums
- drug and alcohol issues
- other long-term health conditions, such as diabetes and asthma.

If you know what the risks are, you and your health-care team can work together to help you stay as healthy as possible.

Make some small changes

Changing just one thing can start to improve your physical health.

Try to:

- replace sugary drinks with plain water

- walk when you might normally drive or catch public transport
- join a quit smoking program
- eat regular meals
- make use of the time when you feel good to cook meals.

"There's so much information out there about living a healthy lifestyle. But just make a start. It can be as simple as aiming to eat one piece of fruit each day."
Sharon, Adelaide

Get regular physical health checks

Ask your GP (family doctor) or psychiatrist for a physical health check if you haven't had one in a while. You should have a physical health check at least once a year.

At a health check your doctor may:

- ask about your medical history
- ask about your lifestyle (for example, if you smoke or how much exercise you do)
- measure your weight
- check your blood pressure
- ask about alcohol, smoking and drug use
- order blood tests for cholesterol or blood sugar levels
- recommend or provide screening tests (for example a Pap smear or bowel cancer test).

Get some exercise

Being active is important for staying physically healthy. People often find that exercise can improve their mental health symptoms.

Find a sport or activity that works for you, and start slowly.

If you already attend a mental health support group, ask for ideas or support to get your own exercise group together.

“If your physical health improves, so will your mental health.” Professor Malcolm Battersby, psychiatrist.

Eat well

Eating well is important for your energy, health and mood.

Eating well means:

- eating plenty of fruit, vegetables and legumes (beans, peas, lentils etc.)
- choosing wholemeal bread, rice and pasta
- cutting down on sugary drinks and food containing lots of fat, sugar and salt
- drinking plenty of water
- limiting alcohol.

Look after your teeth and gums

To make sure your teeth and gums stay healthy:

- ask your doctor about how smoking and cola drinks can damage teeth and gums
- ask if your medication can affect your teeth
- brush your teeth twice a day
- replace sugary drinks with plain water
- have a check up with a dentist once a year.

“My son’s medication has caused his tooth enamel to become soft. He also wasn’t very good at cleaning his teeth. He had to have a root canal and it cost a lot of money. We didn’t know this could happen. Now he looks after his teeth.” Eileen, Auckland

Ask about the benefits and risks of your medication

Talk to your GP or psychiatrist about the benefits and risks of the medications you take.

Some medications have side effects, such as weight gain or making you feel unmotivated. Antipsychotics can affect blood sugar levels, cholesterol and weight.

Ask if it’s possible to change medications or adjust your dose to reduce any effects on your physical health.

Helping someone with their physical health

If you are a family member, friend or carer of someone with mental illness, there are a number of ways you can help them to improve their physical health.

Set goals together

Help the person you are looking after to choose 1-3 simple and achievable goals for their physical health.

For example:

- walk for 20 minutes each evening
- on Sundays, make a meal plan for the week
- drink plain water with meals.

“We are all trying to get fitter and more active in our family. We now take walks together and are setting small targets for ourselves, a big change.”

Eileen, Auckland

Be a good example

As a family member or friend, your own actions can influence the person you’re looking after.

Think about:

- cutting back on your own alcohol or tobacco use
- cooking healthy food together
- drawing up a shared daily timetable for shopping, cooking and eating.

Work with the health-care team

It’s important that people feel comfortable with the professionals working with them.

You can help by:

- offering to go to the doctor or health professional with them
- encouraging the person to speak openly about their own needs
- reminding the person to mention their physical health at appointments
- helping them to make a list of questions to ask
- if needed, ask about an interpreter, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander health worker, or Māori health worker.

“Partners are often told that they don’t need to attend meetings or sessions. But as the patient you get to decide. If you want your partner or family member there it’s your call.” Manjit, Perth

Who can help with physical health?

GP (family doctor)

If you have any questions about your physical health, your GP is a good place to start.

Your GP can:

- provide a physical health check
- arrange for physical health screening tests
- refer you to other health professionals.

Your GP plays a central role in coordinating your healthcare.

Make sure your psychiatrist and other doctors tell your GP about changes to your diagnosis or treatment plan (including medications).

Psychiatrist

A psychiatrist can help with all aspects of your mental and physical health.

Like GPs, they can:

- provide a physical health check
- arrange for physical health screening tests
- refer you to other health professionals, if need be.

Your psychiatrist is a good person to ask about:

- the physical health problems that are common among people with your illness
- any side effects of medications you are taking, and how these may affect your physical health
- physical symptoms you have, such as weight gain, feeling unmotivated, or craving junk food.

If you'd like to see a dietitian, physiotherapist, exercise physiologist or occupational therapist, speak to your GP or psychiatrist.

Dietitian

Dietitians are experts in healthy eating and nutrition. They can develop an eating plan especially for you. They can give you information on healthy eating, shopping for food and cooking.

Physiotherapist

Physiotherapists understand how the body moves and works.

Physiotherapy treatment can help repair damage, reduce stiffness and pain, and increase mobility.

If you have pain (for example back or joint pain) or trouble walking or exercising, a physiotherapist can help.

Exercise physiologist

Exercise physiologists use exercise to help people with medical conditions. They help people manage problems such as obesity, heart disease, diabetes and pain.

They can come up with an exercise plan that matches your needs, ability and how motivated you feel.

Occupational therapist

Occupational therapists have training in both physical and mental health.

Their focus is on helping you to get back to daily activities such as work, exercise, cooking and cleaning.

Cardiometabolic service

Some major hospitals have teams of doctors that can help with multiple symptoms related to physical health such as diabetes, stroke, sleep issues, heart disease and lung problems. Teams like this are becoming more common but may not be available where you live.

More information and support

Australia

- SANE Healthy living guide
www.sane.org
- Heart Foundation Australia
heartfoundation.org.au
- Drug and Alcohol Counselling Online
1800 888 236
counsellingonline.org.au
- Quit 13 78 48
quit.org.au

New Zealand

- Heart Foundation New Zealand
heartfoundation.org.nz
- Health NZ prescriptions for exercise
health.govt.nz
- Simple meal planner
workandincome.govt.nz
- Alcohol and Drug Helpline 0800 787 797
adanz.org.nz
- Quit 0800 778 778
quit.org.nz

Remember

- ✓ Having a mental illness can make it more challenging to stay physically healthy.
- ✓ Have a physical health check every year.
- ✓ Start small. Changing just one or two things can begin to improve your physical health.

This fact sheet is also available online at yourhealthinmind.org

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- trains and supports psychiatrists
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This is a general guide only, and does not replace individual medical advice. Please speak to your doctor for advice about your situation. The RANZCP is not liable for any consequences arising from relying on this information. Subject matter experts, people with lived experience of mental illness and carers all contributed to this fact sheet.