

## Exercise addiction: When working out becomes an obsession.

Since physical activity is often considered to be a very positive thing, it is hard to imagine that it could become a problem. Some people freely admit that they're obsessed with working out.

What does it really mean? At what point does physical activity become an addiction? What are the consequences?



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# Exercise addiction

can be considered to be a behavioural addiction. In this type of addiction, rather than being dependent on a psychotropic drug, the person is dependent on a behaviour such as excessive shopping, working, video game playing and gambling.

**[...SOME 185,000 CANADIANS ARE ADDICTED TO EXERCISE.]**

## Prevalence

In the scientific literature, there is no consensus as to the prevalence of this addiction, and there are many variations in the rates observed.

In the more recent studies, an estimated 0.5% or so of the overall population has an exercise addiction, while the rate goes from 2 to 3% among those who are regularly active. A study of elite athletes in all disciplines showed a 34.8% addiction rate, and the rate was as high as 50% among competitive runners.<sup>1</sup>

Based on these figures, conjecture would indicate that some 185,000 Canadians have an exercise addiction.

### CONSEQUENCES OF BEING ADDICTED TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

You might think it's good to be hooked on physical activity, because that should normally lead to a healthy life. However, the effects of such an addiction can be very harmful.

The initial consequences, such as repetitive strain injuries, are often directly related to the activity itself. When the problem worsens, the consequences may involve a negative impact on relationships, most often resulting in conflicts with loved ones or co-workers. Finally, in the most serious cases, exercise addiction can lead to more significant psychological disorders like depression. ■



## A problem that's also experienced by adolescents

Exercise addictions are apparently even more prevalent among adolescents and young adults. A 2011 study found that 8.5%<sup>2</sup> of high school students have an exercise addiction. What's more, adolescents tend to have a higher percentage of other behavioural addictions. Therefore, when working with young people who seem really keen on practising their physical activity, it is important to be vigilant, so the risks of addiction can be detected as early as possible.

## Correlation with eating disorders

A few studies have reported that eating disorders often co-occur with excessive physical activity. An inverse relationship has also been established. Those who are addicted to exercise are often preoccupied by their body image, their weight and their diet.<sup>3,4</sup> This combination of factors makes it very difficult to get to the root of the problem. Approximately half of those who have an exercise addiction also have an eating disorder. ■

# How does someone become addicted to exercise?

The path leading to exercise addiction consists of four phases:

## 1. RECREATIONAL EXERCISE PHASE

Recreational exercise primarily occurs because it is a pleasurable and rewarding activity. For example, after starting to work out, a person enjoys changes in strength and appearance from exercising. Another person who enjoys regular hikes because the experience of being in nature is pleasurable.

In the first phase, you enjoy taking part in physical activity. Recreational exercise adds to the quality of life, whereas exercise addiction takes away from it. You can be highly engaged in this behaviour, without developing an exercise addiction.

## 2. AT-RISK EXERCISE PHASE

The at-risk exercise phase begins when the motivation with regard to a physical activity is no longer enjoyment but rather an opportunity to relax and unwind. In general, the negative consequences experienced during this phase are the direct result of exercise and are not due to interpersonal problems. For example, you can injure yourself while running or catch a virus following a strenuous workout.

## 3. PROBLEMATIC EXERCISE PHASE

What differentiates problematic exercise from the previous phases is the nature of the negative consequences. The problems associated with exercise at this level are generally interpersonal ones. For example, if a runner's spouse may complain that she would rather go for a run than spend time with him, it may be that the runner is in the problematic exercise phase.

Once in the problematic phase, the behaviour continues, in spite of the fact that the initial goal was reached. It's a little like an alcoholic who continues drinking even though the desired effect from the alcohol has been obtained.

An aspect that's common in this phase is that a group behaviour has now become an individual one. For example, a person who used to go to zumba classes with some co-workers a couple of times a week may choose instead to go to the gym alone in order to increase the frequency, intensity and length of workouts.

Another point that's characteristic of this phase is that, instead of seeking a release of endorphins to feel better, a person may start working out to avoid experiencing withdrawal symptoms.<sup>5</sup>

## 4. ADDICTION PHASE

The frequency and intensity of physical activity continues to increase to the point of becoming the most important thing in the person's life. In this phase, the person may experience more significant consequences such as depression, job loss, etc. ■

## ARE YOU ADDICTED to exercise?

Here are six statements that can help determine an exercise addiction in adults. Indicate your response using the rating scale from 1 to 5.<sup>6</sup>

STRONGLY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
1	2	3	4	5
<input type="checkbox"/>				
	<input type="checkbox"/>			
		<input type="checkbox"/>		
			<input type="checkbox"/>	
				<input type="checkbox"/>
				<input type="checkbox"/>

### TOTAL:

To be considered to be at risk, you must have a score of 24 or more. ■

## In conclusion

Exercise addiction is more widespread than people think, and it can have fairly serious consequences. For that reason, it's a good idea to be mindful of the amount of time devoted to physical activity, to ensure that it is healthy and you're mainly doing it for enjoyment. As the old saying goes, everything in moderation! ■

1. The exercise paradox: An interactional model for a clearer conceptualization of exercise addiction, by Alexei Y. Egorov and Attila Szabó, published in the Journal of Behavioral Addictions, 2013, DOI: 10.1556/JBA.2.2013.4.2. | 2. Behavioural addictions in adolescents and young adults: results from a prevalence study, by C. Vilella, G. Martinotti, M. Di Nicola, M. Cassano, G. La Torre, M.D. Gliubizzi, I. Messeri, F. Petrucelli, P. Bria, L. Janiri and G. Conte. | 3. Eating disorders and exercise dependence in triathletes, by M.J. Blaydon and K.J. Lindner, published in Eating Disorders, 2002, 10, 49-60., DOI: 10.1080/106402602753573559. | 4. Eating disorders: clinical features and pathophysiology, by D.A. Klein and B.T. Walsh, published in Physiology and Behavior, Apr. 2004; 81(2):359-74. | 5. Clarifying Exercise Addiction: Differential Diagnosis, Co-occurring Disorders, and Phases of Addiction, by Marilyn Freimuth, Sandy Moniz and Shari R. Kim, published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, October 2011; 8(10): 4069-4081. | 6. Validation de l'adaptation française de l'échelle de dépendance à l'exercice physique: l'EDS-R, by Laurence Kern, published in Pratiques Psychologiques, December 2007; 13(4):425-441.