



Ask the Expert with Dr. Darrell Menard

Find Answers to your Sport Medicine Questions!

Light up your Brain!

This holiday season, many Canadians are feeling the strain of the pandemic. During this challenging time, a lot of people are using regular exercise to stay in shape. What often goes unrecognized is that regular exercise also offers benefits for your brain. Research consistently shows that regardless of your age or fitness level, making the time to exercise provides important mental health benefits.

The great thing about the “brain” benefits of exercise is they don’t take nearly as long to achieve as the physical benefits. It can take weeks or months of dedicated training to develop a more efficient heart or to strengthen your core. On the other hand, some of the mental health benefits, such as improved mood, can occur almost immediately after exercising. The following is a list of some of the mental health benefits available through regular exercise:

- Improved mood
- Increased memory
- Reduced fatigue
- Enhanced learning capacity
- Increased energy
- Improved self-esteem and self-image
- Better problem solving
- Improved sleep quality
- Reduced stress
- Increased confidence
- Reduced anxiety
- Distraction from worries
- Improved concentration
- Greater creativity

These benefits have been shown to occur from walking as little as 30 minutes/day – three times/wk. You don’t even have to do all 30 minutes at the same time – you can break it up into three x 10 minute walks. While these minimal activity recommendations are a great place to start, the more physically active you become the more mental and physical health benefits you will experience.

As we all continue to navigate our way through the pandemic, it is very clear that regular exercise has a lot to offer every Canadian – mentally and physically. So this holiday season why not be a fitness Santa Claus and give yourself the gifts that come from being physically active. Stay safe, stay active and let’s celebrate this holiday season by lighting more than your tree – why not light up your brain!

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Dr. Darrell Menard is the Surgeon General’s specialist advisor in sport medicine. He has worked extensively with athletes from multiple sports and has covered Canadian teams competing at multiple games including the 2012 Olympics and the 2016 Paralympic games. These articles were originally published in the Canadian Forces Journal, the Maple Leaf.

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