

# Could physical activity help minimize drug and alcohol use?

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Figures and surveys have shown that high-risk alcohol consumption increased during lockdown periods, while exercise decreased.

Now researchers are exploring whether increased [physical activity](#) could help reduce [alcohol](#) and drug misuse long after social restrictions have lifted.

Dr. Tom Thompson from the Community and Primary Care Research Group (CPCRG) at the University of Plymouth recently led two reviews of existing studies, which showed that little data was available and more work was needed to understand the links between physical [activity](#) and its effects on alcohol and [drug use](#).

By understanding the evidence already available, Dr. Thompson and the CPCRG are able to take the next steps towards creating evidence for the benefits of physical activity—not specific to lockdown—and explore the further work that needs to be completed in this area. Given the comorbidity of substance use and other [mental health conditions](#), such as depression and anxiety, the work aligns with other projects taking place across the University.

In the past, members of the research team have visited treatment centers in Canada, the US and Belgium, where exercise facilities are used to support recovery.

The [first review](#) showed some weak evidence of physical activity interventions preventing alcohol initiation but not consumption, and there was a lack of evidence for any long-term or rigorous effects on substance use. The evidence was a mix of studies on whether physical activity stops drug and alcohol use in the first place, and/or whether it limits someone's use after they have started.

The [second review](#) looked at qualitative data—mainly people's views of physical activity in reducing or abstaining from alcohol or substance use. The studies revealed useful information about how physical activity was being used by regular alcohol and other substance users to manage their

use and what type of support was most acceptable and feasible. The review lays the foundations for more rigorous future research.

The work was funded by the NIHR Research for Patient Benefit program and was supported by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Applied Research Collaboration (ARC) South West Peninsula (PenARC). The project involved researchers from the University of Plymouth, University Hospitals Plymouth NHS Trust, the University of Bristol, King's College London, the University of Southampton and Public Health Specialist Gary Wallace from Plymouth City Council.

Dr. Thompson said, "Physical activity is known to be important for our health and wellbeing, but whether it helps to minimize drug and alcohol use—and, if so, to what extent and what factors we need to consider—isn't an area that's been well enough explored. These publications will now form the backbone in a call for submissions of further research articles for a special issue in the international journal *Mental Health and Physical Activity* entitled "Extending the evidence for the role of physical activity in supporting positive changes among individuals who use alcohol and other substances," along with further work that we plan to do in the area."

**More information:** T.P. Thompson et al. Physical activity and the prevention, reduction, and treatment of alcohol and other drug use across the lifespan (The PHASE review): A systematic review, *Mental Health and Physical Activity* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.mhpa.2020.100360](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhpa.2020.100360)

J. Horrell et al. Qualitative systematic review of the acceptability, feasibility, barriers, facilitators and perceived utility of using physical activity in the reduction of and abstinence from alcohol and other drug use, *Mental Health and Physical Activity* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.mhpa.2020.100355](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhpa.2020.100355)

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