

Exercise Can Beat Depression

Patients with depression should be offered exercise on prescription rather than drugs, campaigners say.

The Mental Health Foundation (MHF) say that GPs should be offering all patients with depression a programme of exercise to help combat their symptoms.

The charity's new report - *Up and Running?* - marks the start of a year-long campaign calling for more exercise therapy for people with mild or moderate depression.

It comes amid growing concern about the side effects and over prescribing of antidepressants in the UK.

Guidelines now state that antidepressants should not be used as a first line treatment for mild depression.

The majority of the drugs are also now not recommended for under 18s due to possible side effects including the increased risk of suicide.

Lack of available alternatives

The MHF said that growing evidence showed that a supervised programme of exercise on prescription could be as effective as antidepressants in mild to moderate depression.

But their report said GPs were still turning to the drugs as their first option because they believed there was a lack of available alternatives, such as counseling.

The cost of antidepressant prescriptions in England has risen by more than 2,000 per cent in 12 years, they added.

A poll of 200 GPs found that only five per cent used exercise as one of their three most common treatment responses to depression.

In contrast 92 per cent of GPs used antidepressants as one of their three most common treatment responses.

The survey also found that 78 per cent of doctors had prescribed an antidepressant in the last three years despite believing an alternative treatment might have been more appropriate.

Three-quarters said they had done so because a suitable alternative, such as counseling, was not available.

Not financial

Dr Andrew McCulloch, MHF chief executive, said: "Patients with mild or moderate depression asking their GPs for help are currently being denied an effective treatment option - exercise referral.

"Society needs to be educated about the benefits of exercise in treating mild or moderate depression, and GPs need to be made aware that exercise referral is available."

Paul Bates, head of mental health and disability services at South Tyneside Primary Care Trust, said: "For GPs, the cost of changing their practice is psychological, not financial.

"They're beginning to see that there are alternatives to writing a prescription, and that it's not their sole responsibility to deal with a person's problem - there are alternatives, and exercise referral is an example of that."

The MHF called for the Government to invest £20 million in developing and promoting exercise referral as a treatment for depression across the UK - representing around five per cent of the annual spend on antidepressants in England.