Physical Activity and Depressive Symptoms in College Students: National Study

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Physical activity is accepted as a means of attaining optimal health and preventing disease and also has been supported as a strategy to enhance aspects of emotional health and produce psychological benefits. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of college students' physical activity on depressive and suicidal symptoms. The National College Health Assessment was administered at 107 colleges nationwide providing 71,860 surveys. The questionnaire contained 58 primary questions investigating 6 major domains of health behaviors. Data were analyzed with 4x2 ANOVAs and Games-Howell post hoc tests. Among depressive/suicidal variables, 36% of students reported never feeling hopeless, 20% never feeling very sad and 55% reported never feeling depressed. Conversely, of students reporting feeling depressive symptoms: 25% reported feeling hopeless, 35% reported feeling very sad, 17% reported feeling depressed on 5 or more days in the past year. Most students (90%) reported not having considered attempting suicide or having actually attempting suicide (99% responded never). The percentage of students reporting zero days of physical activity was 26%. For men, the mean was 1–2 days of physical activity per week (M = 1.46), and for women (M = 1.27). Physical activity and gender were both statistically significant on the depressive symptom variable of felt hopeless, but the interaction was not significant. More frequent physical activity related to less frequent depressive symptoms and consideration of suicide, but not with attempted suicide. Males reported depressive symptoms less frequently than females. Further depression research has implications for an increasingly sedentary college population.