

# The Link Between Physical Activity and Academic Performance

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As an ambitious student, you are eager to discover how to increase academic performance. You understand that it takes far more than long hours with your nose in a textbook to improve your grades. Physical and mental health matter. Your lifestyle can play a huge role in determining both your immediate test scores and your long-term GPA. Exercise, in particular, promises to improve your academic performance. That's right—moving your body can be just as effective as studying.

Don't worry if you've previously struggled to hit the gym. It's never too late to build positive habits, especially if you understand the extent to which such practices can impact all areas of your life. By resolving now to keep active, you can completely transform your college—and career—trajectory.

## Why College Students Should Exercise: What the Research Says

Exercise is critical for people of all ages and in all walks of life. It improves both physical and mental health and could play a key role in extending your lifespan. These advantages should offer plenty of incentive to get moving. As a college student, however, exercise also provides several academic benefits worth considering, as highlighted below:

### Improved Concentration

Next time you struggle to focus on test prep, set aside your textbook and go for a jog. You'll likely return to your studies with a clear head and renewed powers of concentration. Students with ADHD have long understood this reality; many address both inattention and hyperactivity by participating in distance sports and other intense forms of physical activity.

Anecdotes about exercise and concentration abound, but empirical evidence also points to the efficacy of an active lifestyle. Researchers at the [University of Western Ontario](#) have discovered that a mere ten minutes of exercise can prime the areas of the brain responsible for executive function.

### Memory and Recall

Focus may be critical for powering through study sessions, but it offers little value if you promptly forget everything you learn. Poor memory makes for inefficient studying which, ultimately, reduces your resolve to persevere when the going gets tough. Thankfully, it's possible to improve both short-term focus and long-term memory through increased physical activity.

A study conducted at the [University of British Columbia](#) found significant boosts to the size of the hippocampus—the part of the brain responsible for verbal memory—among those who pursue exercise on a regular basis. These results do not apply to resistance training, although that should not be cause for abandoning your weight-lifting routine. Aerobic activity, however, appears to be uniquely capable of improving recall.

### **Greater Creativity**

In today's career-oriented college environment, it's easy to discount the value of creativity. In reality, however, creative thinking is important in both academia and the work world. Beyond the arts, this underrated quality plays a critical role in everything from digital media to accounting. Creativity drives success in term papers, capstone projects, and a variety of other ambitious endeavors. It's built through practice, of course, but can also be developed through movement. A growing body of research verifies the role of physical activity in boosting creativity. For example, a 2013 study published in the journal [Frontiers in Human Neuroscience](#) reveals that athletes outperform their less active peers in creativity tests. This study's results suggest a relationship between regular exercise and two main types of thinking: convergent and divergent. Convergent thinking involves developing a single solution for a problem, whereas divergent thought leads to multiple solutions. Both types of thinking are crucial not only in college, but also for success in today's competitive workforce.

### **The Power of Emotion**

College success may be possible with a negative mindset, but academic challenges feel a lot less daunting when you're in a good mood. Unfortunately, today's students face numerous sources of stress, which can make it difficult to maintain a cheerful outlook. When anxious, it can be tempting to turn to ineffective coping mechanisms such as procrastination or stress eating. Exercise may be a better option. Even a brief burst of physical activity can deliver a fast-acting surge of endorphins. This, in turn, could prompt positive emotions. A noteworthy study published in [JAMA Psychology](#) suggests that replacing just fifteen minutes of daily sitting with vigorous activity can dramatically reduce the likelihood of suffering depression. This is promising, as depression and other mental health issues harm [college graduation rates](#).

## **How to Increase Academic Performance by Leading an Active Lifestyle**

You're well aware of the need for physical activity in your day-to-day life, but acting on this knowledge may prove easier said than done. As you juggle a busy schedule, you may struggle to find time to keep active. In the rare cases in which you're able to carve out an hour or two, Netflix may prove too tempting.

When in doubt, start small. A few simple tweaks can help you build exercise into your lifestyle. Buoyed by increased endorphins, you just might find that an initial boost in exercise helps you build a variety of healthy habits.

If you're struggling to stay motivated, try these simple suggestions:

- *Get involved in organized sports or other college-based recreational pursuits.* Don't think of this as forcing yourself to exercise, but rather, as an opportunity to build strong relationships with your fellow students. Scheduled practices and games will hold you accountable.
- *Track your step count.* Whether you use a Fitbit or a simple app on your smartphone, you can track your progress while adding small bursts of exercise here and there. You'll be surprised by how quickly those brief periods of activity add up. Aim for at least 10,000 steps per day.
- *Integrate exercise with studying.* Some of your textbooks or other course material may be available in audio format. Download this content on your smartphone and listen while you use the treadmill or stroll around your neighborhood.
- *Walk or bike to class.* If you live on or near campus, ditch your car and find a new way to get to class. This simple switch could boost both your mood and concentration before you arrive on campus. Even parking further away could make a difference. If you're exclusively enrolled in online courses, set aside a few minutes between study sessions for a brisk walk.
- *Prioritize exercise goals.* Yes, your academic performance is important, but good grades and exercise are not mutually exclusive. When you set your goals for the semester, be sure to include exercise. Some students find it easiest to plan to visit the gym a specific number of times. Others are motivated by athletic goals such as completing a 5k or bench pressing a specific amount of weight.

Exercise may not seem particularly important when a term paper or final exam looms, but it plays a greater role in your GPA than you might think. Like it or not, physical activity and academic performance are inextricably linked. Why not use this to your advantage? A little extra movement can go a long way, so don't hesitate to break a sweat.