

LIFESTYLE AS MEDICINE

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WELCOME | LIFESTYLE AS MEDICINE | HEALTH |
ENGLAND

26 Lifestyle messages for 2026

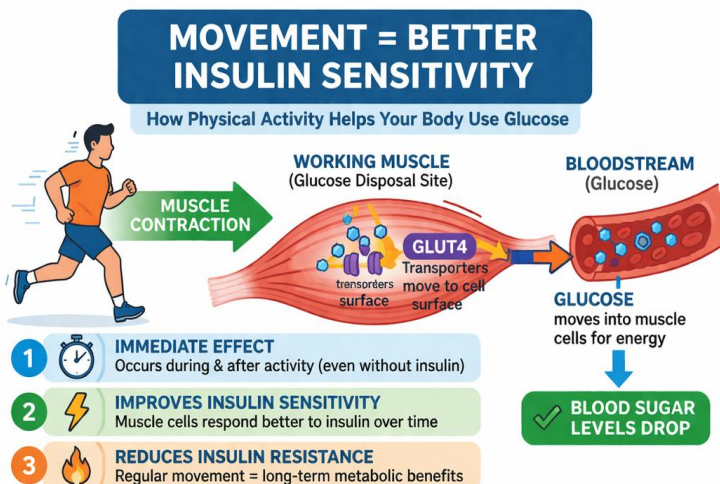
6. Movement is medicine – regular physical activity improves insulin sensitivity, mental health, and longevity.

Why physical activity should be prescribed, not just suggested.

1. Movement and Insulin Sensitivity: A First-Line Intervention

Physical activity is one of the most powerful—yet underutilised—tools for improving insulin sensitivity. Skeletal muscle is the primary site of glucose disposal, and contraction stimulates glucose uptake via insulin-independent pathways (notably GLUT4 translocation). This means that even in individuals with insulin resistance, movement can immediately lower blood glucose levels.

Regular movement improves mitochondrial function, reduces visceral adiposity, and enhances metabolic flexibility. Importantly, benefits are seen with relatively small, frequent bouts of activity—not just structured exercise.



Clinical takeaways:

- Encourage patients to break up sedentary time (e.g. 2–3 minutes of walking every 30–60 minutes)
- Postprandial movement (10–15 minute walks after meals) significantly reduces glucose excursions
- Resistance training is particularly effective for improving insulin sensitivity and preserving lean mass

BEST TYPES OF MOVEMENT FOR INSULIN SENSITIVITY



WALKING
(especially post-meal)

⌚ 10–15 min



RESISTANCE TRAINING
(builds lean muscle)

✓ 2–3x per week



FREQUENT MOVEMENT
(reduce sitting time)

⌚ Every 30–60 min



KEY TAKEAWAY: Your muscles are a "glucose sponge"—movement squeezes glucose out of your blood and into your muscles!

Practice tip:

Frame movement as a *tool to manage blood glucose in real time*, not just a long-term lifestyle change.

2. Movement and Mental Health: A Neurobiological Intervention

The mental health benefits of physical activity are well established and increasingly understood at a mechanistic level. Movement influences neurotransmitter systems (serotonin, dopamine), increases brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), and reduces systemic inflammation—all of which are implicated in depression and anxiety.

Physical activity has been shown to be **as effective** as first-line pharmacological treatments for mild to moderate depression in some populations, with additional benefits for sleep, self-efficacy, and cognitive function.

Clinical takeaways:

- Even low-intensity activity (e.g. walking, stretching, gardening) can improve mood
- Consistency matters more than intensity
- Outdoor movement may confer additional benefits via sunlight exposure and circadian regulation

Practice tip: Prescribe movement in *achievable doses*- 10 minutes daily” is often more effective than vague recommendations like “exercise more.”



Many people we work with are ‘less able’ and conversations around increasing movement in their lives can feel too difficult to tackle.

An *amazing* resource is [Be More Active Whilst Living With A Health Condition](#) by Sport England. **Check it out now. Save the link.**

We Are Undefeatable [Be More Active Whilst Living With A Health Condition](#)

The benefits of using 'We Are Undefeatable' to help patients move more include:

- [Increased Physical Activity: Encouraging patients to engage in physical activities that can help manage their health conditions.](#)
- [Improved Health and Wellbeing: Evidence suggests that being active can help manage many conditions and reduce the impact and severity of some symptoms.](#)
- [Mood and Wellbeing: Improved mood and wellbeing are seen as the biggest benefits , with 52% of respondents reporting this.](#)
- [Community Support: Providing a supportive community for patients to share experiences and find inspiration.](#)

Online classes Mon-Thurs. Twice weekly online coffee mornings.

Zero side effects! Zero cost to drug budget!

3. Movement and Longevity: Extending Healthspan, Not Just Lifespan

Physical activity is strongly associated with reduced all-cause mortality and increased healthspan. It lowers risk across multiple chronic conditions, including cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, certain cancers, and neurodegenerative disorders.

Crucially, it is never too late to benefit. Studies show that individuals who become active later in life still experience significant reductions in mortality risk.

From a physiological perspective, movement supports:

- Cardiovascular health (improved endothelial function, blood pressure regulation)
- Musculoskeletal integrity (bone density, fall prevention)
- Immune resilience and reduced chronic inflammation

Clinical takeaways:

- Aim for a combination of aerobic activity, strength training, and balance work
- “Some is good, more is better—but any is better than none”
- Reducing sedentary time is as important as increasing exercise

Practice tip: Reframe physical activity as *essential maintenance for ageing well*, not optional fitness.



Bottom line for clinicians. Benefits of increasing activity one level

(zero/ minimal activity/ moderate activity/ intense exercise)

- Lifespan: +3 to 7 (sometimes more) years
- Healthspan: +5 to 10+ years of healthier, independent living

👉 **If there were a drug that delivered this magnitude of benefit, it would be first-line in every guideline.**

And while benefits are cumulative (ie, more exercise is generally better) **the BEST outcomes come from getting someone to go from NOTHING to SOMETHING.**

Some stretching. Some sit-to-stands indoors. Step-ups on the bottom step.

Or using the We Are Undeatable App

References

[Physical Activity/Exercise and Diabetes: A Position Statement of the American Diabetes Association - PubMed](#)

[Physical Activity and Incident Depression: A Meta-Analysis of Prospective Cohort Studies - PubMed](#)

[Overview | Depression in adults: treatment and management | Guidance | NICE](#)

[Dose-response associations between accelerometry measured physical activity and sedentary time and all cause mortality: systematic review and harmonised meta-analysis - PubMed](#)

And Finally

I have to share with you my personal sense of failure. That I have spent so many years as a GP and NOT made movement and exercise a priority in conversations with patients 😞 . But it's never too late to start! I'm moving more myself and encouraging people close to me to do so too. One of them has recently reversed pre-diabetes; the main change they made was a weekly strength session at the local gym.



Me, with Liz Carter being put through my paces at Norse gyme

Jen

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