

Good mental health and better sleep for the physically active

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The fittest find time and opportunity to train, also during COVID-19. Credit: Shutterstock, NTB scanpix

In the middle of the pandemic this spring, researchers at NTNU conducted a survey among members of Kondis, a Norwegian fitness training organization.

Since this survey was sent out in the middle of the lockdown in Norway, participants were asked whether they had changed their exercise habits as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The aim of these initial analyses was to map mental [health](#) and sleep problems, and to investigate whether changes in exercise habits had consequences for sleep.

"Not surprisingly, we found that the incidence of anxiety and depression is significantly lower in this relatively fit sample than among other people. And this was the case despite the fact that we conducted the survey in the middle of the toughest part of the COVID time," says Linda Ernstsens, an associate professor at NTNU's Department of Public Health and Nursing.

These findings come as little surprise to the researchers. The connection between physical and mental health has been known for a long time, not least through the 240 000 people who have participated in the large HUNT Surveys in Trøndelag County.

More people trained more than they used to

But the new survey still offers some surprises, especially related to the fact that a lot of people changed their exercise habits this spring.

Ernstsens carried out the study with project manager and associate professor Audun Havnen from the Department of Psychology.

"It was surprising that so many people increased their amount of exercise during the coronavirus pandemic. Since people were encouraged to avoid [public spaces](#) and stay home, the fact that so many used the extra time they had to move more was a positive effect," says Havnen.

This survey is the first of three surveys to be conducted among Kondis members. The overall goal of the questionnaires is to study the relationship between different aspects of physical activity, mental health and quality of life in a sample assumed to be fit, and how this changes over time.

Training changes yielded same sleep result

[10.1016/j.sleep.2020.08.030](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleep.2020.08.030)

Although active people generally suffer less depression and anxiety than others, some of them still do get depressed and anxious.

Provided by Norwegian University of Science and Technology

When COVID-19 struck this spring, many Kondis members modified their training habits, regardless of whether they were struggling with [mental health problems](#) or not. You would think that this change would affect their quality of sleep as well. But that didn't happen.

"We thought the connection between mental health and sleep problems would be more pronounced in people who changed how much they exercised. But we found no differences," says Ernstsens.

The two groups were thus affected in exactly the same way, regardless of changes in their exercise habits.

Mental health affects sleep

This doesn't mean that there is no connection between mental health and sleep, even in this active group.

"We found a connection between anxiety symptoms and sleep problems and a connection between depressive symptoms and sleep problems," Ernstsens says.

People with depression and anxiety consistently sleep less well than others. This is true for the most physically fit among us as well.

"Since all the participants answered the questions at the same time this spring, so far we only know that there's a connection between physical activity, [mental health](#) and sleep. To investigate what leads to what, we've invited the participants to take the survey again after six and twelve months to study changes over [time](#)," says Havnen.

More information: Linda Ernstsens et al. Mental health and sleep disturbances in physically active adults during the COVID-19 lockdown in Norway: does change in physical activity level matter?, *Sleep Medicine* (2020). [DOI:](#)

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