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The Effect Habitual Exercise on Older Adults Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic.

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The COVID-19 pandemic increased existing social isolation challenges in older adults due to quarantine and social distancing policies. Social isolation can be associated with an increase in mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. Due to social isolation, many older adults had limited access to exercise opportunities. This is important because exercise can also affect mental health. **PURPOSE:** To consider the impact of exercise habits on older adults' mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODS: The data used were from the Health and Retirement Study, a longitudinal study interviewing a representative sample of older adults biennially about physical and mental health, employment, and daily activities. In 2020, additional questions were added relating to COVID-19 and distributed to a subset of participants. Participants completed a physical activity questionnaire, the Beck Anxiety Inventory (n=1920) and the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression questionnaire (n=2909). We ran logistic regression models. Model one had anxiety as the outcome of interest, and model 2 depressive symptoms. The independent variable was engaging in moderate exercise at least twice a week. All analyses were adjusted for covariates including the number of chronic health conditions, race/ethnicity, financial hardship during the pandemic, education, and alcohol use. **RESULTS:** Approximately 47% of this sample reported exercising 1 or less times per week (mean age 70±11 years, 49% female) compared to 53% reporting that they exercise 2 or more times per week (mean age 67±11 years, 51% female). Compared to older adults who exercised 2 or more times a week, those who exercised 1 or fewer times per week were found to be at increased risk for having elevated anxiety (OR = 1.41, 95% CI= .695 -2.92) and depressive symptomology (OR =1.98,95% CI =1.51-2.59).

CONCLUSIONS: Exercising one or fewer times a week during the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with higher odds of anxiety and depressive symptoms in older adults. Older individuals who exercise less may be at increased risk for mental health symptoms during times of high psychosocial stress. With the emergence of new variants and uncertainty of the pandemic, it is important that older adults are encouraged to exercise to reduce odds of poor mental health outcomes.