
Exercise May Fight Addiction

BY PEGGY O'FARRELL

New approaches for treating and preventing drug addiction range from low-tech - regular exercise - to high-tech such as experimental vaccines aimed at helping to prevent former drug users from relapsing.

Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, is just as excited about both options.

Of the two, though, exercise will probably yield the quickest payoff.

"It's something we could apply right away," she said. "Vaccines, we're not going to get those results in one or two years. It will take probably five, six years to results."

Statistics indicate that teens who exercise daily are the least likely to report using drugs or alcohol, Volkow said Tuesday at a NIDA-sponsored conference on addiction treatment and research at Duke Energy Center downtown.

NIDA, part of the National Institutes of Health, is sponsoring research to see if - and why - regular exercise prevents substance abuse. The agency is also awarding grants to determine whether working up a sweat can make addiction treatment more successful.

Addiction is a wide-ranging disease that affects every aspect of an addict's life, Volkow said. Strategies for preventing and treating it need to be just as wide-ranging.

Treatment providers and researchers need to work together to identify which strategies will be most effective.

Exercise has the advantage of being inexpensive and easily accessible, Volkow said.

Researchers are also studying whether a vaccine can help prevent cocaine addicts who have already been through treatment to avoid falling back into using.

An experimental vaccine produces antibodies that short-circuit the drug's ability to get users high. It also prevents overdose.

But the existing version of the vaccine doesn't produce enough antibodies to work in everyone, Volkow said, so a new version is needed.

Researchers at the University of Cincinnati have applied to be part of the next phase of testing on the vaccine, said Eugene Somoza, an addictions specialist at UC and the VA Medical Center in Avondale.

Somoza was one of the speakers at Tuesday's conference.

"Addicts know it's a crazy situation they're in. They're working for the pusher, essentially," he said. "They want to stop using, but they can't."

A similar vaccine is in the works for nicotine addiction, Somoza said.

Other new priorities in addiction treatment and research include identifying genes that might influence a person's risk for addictive behavior and studying how well Web-based programs help doctors screen for addiction.



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