Aerobic Exercise to Reduce Depression in Women after Childbirth

Background

- Globally around 13 million women suffer post-partum depression (i.e. after childbirth) annually.
- Depression after childbirth can affect the social and cognitive development of the child(ren).
- Women may be reluctant to take antidepressants following birth, especially if they are breastfeeding due to the possible risks.
- While cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is effective, there are often long waiting lists.
- Previous research has shown that exercise can reduce feelings of depression in a general adult population, and group exercise led by a qualified instructor is recommended by NICE.
- However, after childbirth women may face certain physical, practical and psychological challenges.
- This study analysed trials looking at the effect of aerobic exercise on depressive symptoms in women after childbirth.
Findings:

- A total of 13 randomised controlled trials were brought together, with 1,307 participants.

- All trials looked at interventions to increase level of exercise; six featured group exercise interventions, while seven provided exercise advice and allowed the participants to choose their own exercise.

- Overall, exercise interventions significantly reduced symptoms of depression (standardised mean difference -0.44 [95% CI -0.75 to -0.12]). Significant reductions in symptoms were seen in both women who had possible depression after childbirth and in those who did not.

- When the authors looked at specific types of exercise they found significant effects on reducing depression from exercise with other interventions, group exercise interventions, and interventions where the women could choose the exercise type. Exercise-only interventions only had a non-significant effect on reducing depression.

- However, there was a large amount of variation in study outcomes between studies and a high risk of bias in a number of the trials, so some caution should be taken when interpreting these results.

Recommendations for Practice

Given the high prevalence of depression after childbirth, and that exercise is low-cost and easily available, then aerobic exercise should be considered, both as management for those with depression and as a preventive measure for all.

Reference: