

Sports classes prescribed for heart-disease patients

DOCTORS should be able to prescribe physical activity to patients “of all ages”, sports minister Amélie Oudéa-Castéra proposed in September.

However, an experiment is already underway to evaluate the benefits of prescribed, reimbursed physical activity in managing chronic illnesses.

Over five months, almost 500 people who recently suffered from serious heart problems have been taking part in two sports classes per week.

The classes follow on from the three-week cardiac rehabilitation patients already receive.

Nine health centres from five regions were chosen to participate in the experiment, dubbed ‘As du Coeur’, which began in October last year.

It follows a 2015 study in which 45 people suffering from cardiovascular disease followed a five-month exercise programme, resulting in a €1,300, or 30%, reduction in healthcare costs per patient on average.

“This is a country where medicine is more curative than preventative,” said Dr Alain

Fuch, president of Azur Sport Santé, the association leading the project.

Since 2016, doctors have been able to prescribe physical activity to those suffering from chronic illnesses, though this is

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In France, medicine is more curative than preventative

Dr Alain Fuch,
Azur Sport Santé

not currently reimbursed.

Just 30% of doctors prescribed physical activity in 2018, according to the Haute autorité de santé, which recently published a guide for doctors to help them understand when and why to prescribe exercise.

“It was revolutionary to consider physical activity as a treatment like any other, but to see the full effects, it needs to

be funded,” Dr Fuch said.

“Before, when patients finished rehab, doctors would tell them to continue exercising, but once home, 99% stopped and resumed their normal lives.”

The goal of the study is to show that free sports classes help patients and could be introduced around the country. “As well as the health benefits, there is a financial benefit. So there is no longer any argument for not funding it.”

If successful, the programme could be extended to all heart patients undergoing rehab, as well as other chronic illnesses. Classes typically feature Nordic walking, with poles, to increase endurance, and circuit training to rebuild muscle.

Thibault Le Pallec, director of Clinique Saint Yves in Rennes, one of the nine participating establishments, said: “Heart disease is often chronic and linked to an unhealthy lifestyle or a lack of physical activity.

“Lots of studies have shown that relapse is common.”

Céline Chouhan, in charge of rehabilitation at the clinic, said

three weeks of physical activity is insufficient. “Our brain needs 10 weeks to change its habits.”

The programme also includes an educational component, to understand the patient’s motivations and teach them to take responsibility for their own treatment.

Patients at Saint Yves completed the trial in August and the clinic is now focusing on getting the habit to stick.

Mr Le Pallec recognises the importance of giving patients a leg-up to start living a healthier lifestyle, but he believes it would be unrealistic for public health insurance to fund the classes in the long term.

“The state cannot be responsible for individual behaviours.”

Health authorities say 53% of French women and 70% of men attain the WHO’s recommendations of 30 minutes of daily physical activity.

As well as managing heart disease, physical activity can reduce the risk of diabetes and of breast cancer recurring, and can be used to treat other disorders, such as depression.

...and Connexion joins a Nordic walking group

In Mougins, a group of heart patients meets weekly for a free Nordic walking class. **Martin Greenacre** tagged along

“THIS IS the life. It’s better out here than in the gym.”

Eric Marcq, 56, takes a breath of crisp morning air. Every Thursday since mid-June, he has come to this lake in Mougins (Alpes-Maritimes) for a spot of Nordic walking.

The group sessions are part of the ‘As du Coeur’ programme, testing free five-month exercise regimes for people who recently suffered from serious heart problems.

Every week, the group has one hour of Nordic walking and one session in the gym.

After spending the first few weeks walking around the lake, today the group is heading into the forest in search of hills to increase the difficulty.

“You would never believe we were operated on two or three months ago,” says former lorry driver Francis Bozzano.

Although he had no symptoms and had an active lifestyle, after Mr Bozzano was encouraged by his doctor to see a cardiologist, he learned he was suffering from aortic dilation.

His aorta had expanded and was at risk of rupturing.

He underwent open-heart surgery, after which he began suffering from arrhythmia,



Each participant had undergone surgery or other complications requiring cardiac rehabilitation

requiring two cardioversions – electrical shocks to restore a regular heart rhythm – and ablation surgery.

“Eleven days later, I could walk across my room. I asked the nurse to help me up so I could walk to the window. When I got back, I sat on the bed and cried like a fountain.”

Today’s activities are led by Marie-Line Alemany of Vitae Sport Santé, one of 436 Maisons Sport-Santé set up from 2019 to provide equal access to the health benefits of physical activity.

The walking is broken up by different exercises, including using a park bench to perform step-ups. The idea is to show the group workouts they can replicate themselves without expensive equipment.

Mr Bozzano also enjoys cycling long distances, but he believes the programme has helped his physical recovery.

“We work the muscles we don’t normally use,” he says. He

has started coming to the lake on Sunday mornings for more Nordic walking. “I even bought the poles.”

Former lawyer Marie-Christine Ferry, 75, was also active before being diagnosed with coronary artery spasm, which caused her to experience sporadic chest pains.

“I would do long hikes, but only once every one or two weeks. I’ve learned it’s better to do less, but regularly,” she says.

The positive dynamic within the group has helped both her physical and mental recovery.

“It allows you to regain confidence in the possibility of living a normal life. Before, I didn’t dare sing, go hiking, do anything, I was afraid of having an attack. Now I’ve learned to manage it.

“I’m now looking for groups to do Nordic walking as well as hiking. I don’t know if I would have done it if I’d had to pay.”

For others, the prescription was the push they needed to

get back into the rhythm of regular exercise. That was the case for René Malegue, 69, who had surgery in March.

“For four months before that, I wasn’t supposed to exercise, as I risked sudden death.

“I’m really happy this exists, because I know myself, I would have done nothing. I struggle to take it upon myself and go walking alone. Here, there’s a programme, we start slowly and do different exercises.”

At the end of the hour, the group stretch out their calves, while Mr Bozzano makes sure they are doing it properly. “I’m watching!” he says.

“We have a good laugh,” Ms Ferry says.

“That’s very important. It helps to make what we’re living through feel less dramatic.”

Ms Alemany adds: “They forge ties. In their hardship, there is a team spirit, as they’ve all experienced the same thing.”

Of the three groups she began with, two have come to the end of the five months.

During their final evaluation, out of 20 participants, just two said they would not have followed the programme if the cost had not been reimbursed.

Whether or not this is true, what is certain is the positive atmosphere in Ms Alemany’s classes. Many expressed a wish not just to continue their physical activity, but to continue under her supervision.

“I created a class just for them. We start next week. Out of 20, 10 have already signed up, and others are a maybe.”

The Connexion

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