

# Workplace Wellness



## Why Exercise Is Practical for Dental Hygienists

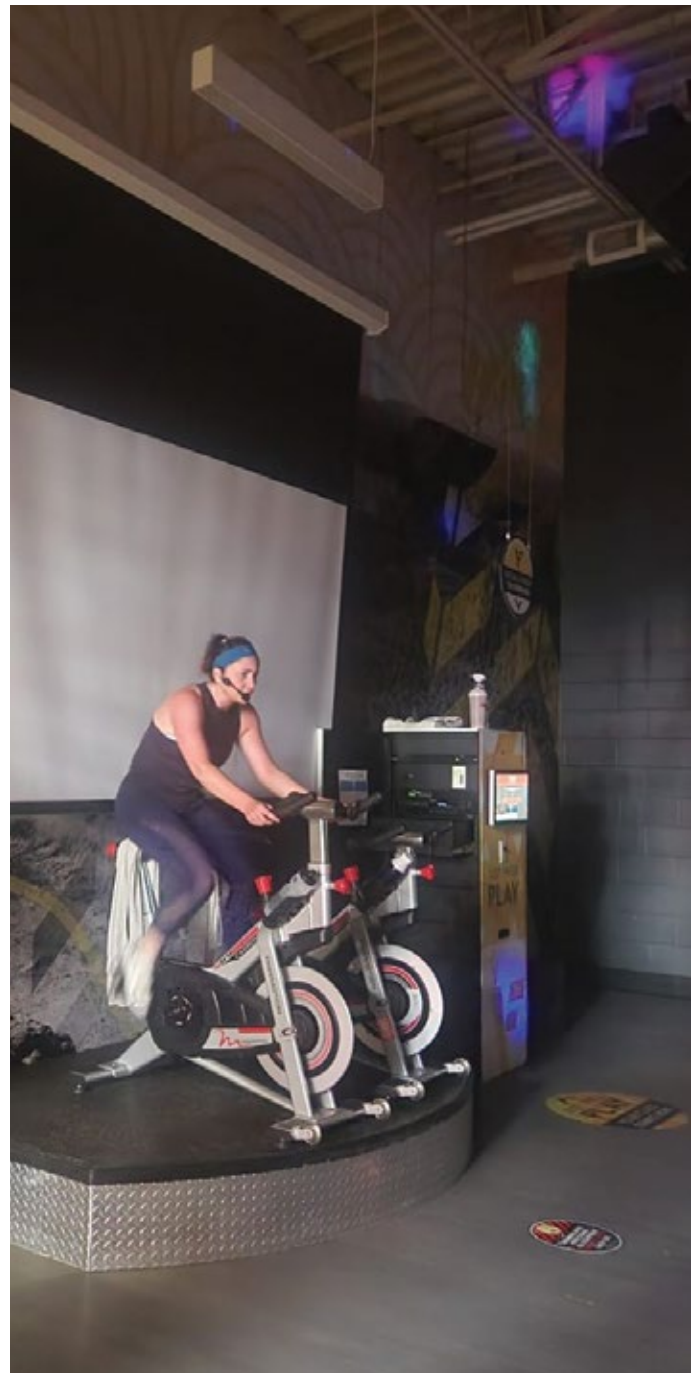
by Deborah Daniel, RDH, MHSc, PMP, DASM, CHE • [Debdaniel123@gmail.com](mailto:Debdaniel123@gmail.com)

I definitely missed the class in dental hygiene school where they told us proper ergonomics and body position would help...to a certain point. That is, until you get the client who can't lie back and barely opens their mouth, or the one who says no to the Cavitron, or the squirmy kid—all in one lovely 10-hour day!

Early in my career, I was only working clinically 25 to 30 hours per week while finishing my undergraduate degree, but I quickly started experiencing a stiff neck, a tight right shoulder, strained wrists, and lower back pain. I was doing cardio and weight training at the gym, but it wasn't enough to combat the mental and physical stress of clinical practice plus studying hunched over. I knew my body and mind were not going to survive without making a change.

The practical benefits of exercising for dental hygienists are clear and include improved muscle balance, endurance, and strength, and greater core stability to maintain good posture.<sup>1</sup> We don't just want to reduce the chances of musculoskeletal injuries; we also want the mental health and stress relief benefits.

Even knowing this, I struggled to find the motivation to exercise when I was already sore and tired. So, I started with a stretching yoga class to help destress, loosen muscles, and improve flexibility (I'm not flexible!).<sup>1</sup> I figured a class might motivate me to persevere, which it did. From there, I tried the Les Mills RPM™ spinning class at GoodLife Fitness. Indoor cycling provides low-impact cardiovascular fitness that is easy on the joints, strengthens the core, and improves the daily functioning of upper and lower body muscles that support everyday movements, especially as a dental hygienist.<sup>2,3</sup> Over time, this type of workout also builds up your mental strength and sense of personal achievement while relieving stress, because once you are in that spin zone, you take your mind off that rough day at work and you feel accomplished when you finish your workout.<sup>3,4</sup>



As you start feeling and seeing the benefits of your hard work, you will be motivated to do more! I started adding weight training to improve my strength and stabilization through Les Mills BODYPUMP™.<sup>5</sup> This class uses high repetitions with light weights to help build lean muscle mass, improve posture, and prevent injuries.<sup>5</sup> Group classes also provide a sense of community, increasing social connectedness and offering mutual support, which make it easier to keep coming back!<sup>3</sup> Surprisingly, I also started to feel some relief for my aches and pains, which made me want to continue even more.

Through cycling, strength training, and stretching, I was able to get stronger, improve my emotional well-being, and continue practising clinically while finishing my Master of Health Science in Health Administration. Over several years, I was able to start moving away from frontline care towards project management and quality improvement in health care.

So, did leaving clinical practice make everything better? No. Our dental hygienist bodies never forget! Sitting at a desk, using a computer, typing—all require a strong and stable body to work successfully through these repetitive tasks.

Do I still do RPM and BODYPUMP? Yes. I became an instructor of both! Learning the new releases and preparing for classes gives me purpose and focus, which helps control my anxiety. I also run 5K with my dog 2 to 3 times per week. I use our morning runs and walks to clear my mind and focus on the music and my breathing. It is a great feeling and no, you don't need to be super fit, fast or run long distances.

Whether you are currently practising clinically or have moved on to something else, the benefits of exercise combined with good ergonomics can help support your body and mind. We also can't forget to give our bodies time to rest and heal, and to fuel our bodies with proper nutrition. Most importantly, we need to be kind to ourselves on this journey and enjoy a cookie...or three!

#### References

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