‘When we exercise, we’re not just doing it for ourselves’: Why going on a run today could benefit your future grandkids

Exercising now is good for you. But could it also be good for your future children and grandchildren?

A provocative new study says it might be. The findings, based on research in mice, suggest that the exercise we do today etches itself into our cells in ways that can be passed to later generations.

In the study, exercise by female mice before and during pregnancy influenced the health of their future children and children’s children, even if those progeny never exercised at all.

While you may be thinking that a mouse study is hardly relevant to humans, the idea that one generation’s way of life shapes the health of the next is “quite well-recognized” scientifically, said Laurie Goodyear, a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and senior investigator at the Joslin Diabetes Center in Boston, who oversaw the new study.

In animal and human studies, mothers and fathers with poor nutrition who develop diabetes, obesity and other metabolic disorders often transmit a predisposition to those conditions to their offspring, she said.

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Scientists call this process developmental programming. They suspect it depends on both the environment inside a mother’s womb during pregnancy and on epigenetics, or small changes in how our genes work, based on how we eat and live.

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