Reviewer's report

Title: Exercise for patients with depression: a protocol for a systematic review with meta-analysis and trial sequential analysis

Version: 4 Date: 11 January 2015

Reviewer: Jesse Berlin

Reviewer's report:

Minor Essential Revisions:
1. I'm not making specific suggestions, but the writing could still benefit from some close editing.

Discretionary Revisions
1. This is not a major point, but you plan to exclude studies that don't have a “no exercise” control group, but do look at different intensities of exercise. This isn't a point on which I’d insist, but I would ask that you at least consider some sort of investigation of dose-response, which is probably best estimated within a given study (preserving the randomization). That would mean including these studies of different intensities in a separate analysis. It’s just a suggestion for your consideration.

NOTE: On page 13, you say, “In addition, we will compare the effect of low-dose exercise to high-dose exercise in trials using different exercise intensities in the experimental groups as well as in trials allocating patients to different exercise doses versus a control group.” It’s not clear from this statement whether you plan to do some kind of summary of within-study comparisons of intensity or some kind of cross-study comparisons (i.e., the effect size for studies with high intensity compared with the effect size for studies with low intensity exercise). As I noted, I believe the stronger analysis of intensity would be based on within-study comparisons, if those are possible. In any case, it’s important to be clear about this distinction (between within-study and between-study comparisons).

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I am a full-time employee of Johnson & Johnson. I see no conflict related to the topic of the paper.