

Social and physical activity keeps elders sprightly

The findings of a new study from the US have furthered the belief that physical and mental stimulation will keep people more youthful as they age.

Contrastingly, those older people who don't take part in physical activity and social events increase their risk of declining motor function, say researchers from Rush University Medical Centre.

Lead researcher, Dr Aron Buchman, an associate professor in the department of neurological sciences said, 'A broader range of activities in elders, including physical, social and cognitive activities, may slow the rate of age-related decline. Less frequent participation in social activity was associated with a more rapid rate of motor decline'.

Buchman and his fellow researchers collated data from 906 older adults who participated in the Rush Memory and Aging Project between 1997 and 2008. The researchers measured assorted motor functions over a five-year period. These included gauging participants' grip and pinch strength; their ability to stand on one leg as well as on their toes; their ability to walk in line in a heel-to-toe manner; the speed with which they could place pegs on a board, and how many times they could tap their index-finger in a 10-second period. The frequency of their social activities, including eating out, visiting family and friends and participation in a religious or charitable community was also rated using a five-point scale.

The results showed a correlation between infrequent social activity and increased rate of motor function decline. Researchers noted a 33 per cent faster rate of decline in motor function for every point decrease in social activity. They worked out that a one-point decrease on the social activity scale equated to being approximately five years older at the study's onset. Put simply, those with less social interaction appeared physically and mentally older. The decline in motor function was also linked with a 65 per cent increased risk of developing disability and more than 40 per cent increased risk of death, prompting Buchman to say, 'Social engagement may slow the rate of age-related motor decline'.

The findings also held up to scrutiny after factors including disability, global cognition depressive symptoms, late-life physical and cognitive activity, body composition and chronic medical conditions, were taken into account.

CEO of the International Council on Active Aging in Vancouver, Colin Milner, was not surprised by the findings, and commented candidly about his personal experience with social and physical engagement and ageing; 'Inherently we know that being social is important in life and good, but a lot of times we don't relate it to physical health. My dad is 77, he doesn't get out, he just sits around all day. He retired two years ago and probably lost his purpose for life. He has just literally declined and aged in front of me, and now looks as old as my grandfather does at 98. He was vibrant, now his skin colour has changed, just everything has changed' Milner said.

He went on; 'We are social beings. If you are socially engaged, you are out and about and getting some movement. Friends are good, being involved in social activities is good. If you are engaged in life, you are engaged in all the things that keep you healthy'.

Source: Archives of Internal Medicine

Weight loss surgery may increase kidney stone risk

A recent study has suggested that 'Roux-en-Y' surgery, a common weight-loss procedure could increase the risk of developing kidney stones – although the odds are still fairly low.

Roux-en-Y is the most popular form of gastric bypass surgery, and involves surgical connections around the bowel that help decrease stomach capacity and enable food to bypass part of the small intestine. It had previously been thought that, unlike other types of bariatric surgery, Roux-en-Y did not cause kidney stones, but the new study found that a patient who undergoes the procedure may double their chances of developing the stones, to eight per cent. Kidney stones are caused when oxalate in food combines with calcium or other chemicals to form clusters of crystals which can

be painful to pass via normal urination. Surgery is sometimes used to treat the condition. The study was based on a comparison of the insurance claims of over 4,600 Roux-en-Y patients with the same number of obese people who did not undergo the procedure.

Lead researcher Dr Brian Matlaga, an assistant professor of urology at the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, said, 'Our study is not an indictment of bariatric surgery – the benefits of this surgery are well-known. Rather, we'd like to help physicians understand that their bariatric patients could be at risk for kidney stones, a condition that could be avoidable with proper preventative care'. He speculated that the reason for the formation of the kidney stones may be that Roux-en-Y surgery may reduce the amount of calcium that patients absorb, a situation which could be remedied with calcium supplements.

Source: Journal of Urology

Method developed to diagnose overtraining syndrome

The prevalence of human and equine stress-related illnesses, such as overtraining syndrome, is increasing. Until now, no diagnostic test was available to determine overtraining syndrome with certainty. Researchers from the Utrecht University in the Netherlands (in cooperation with Maastricht University, Vrije Universiteit Brussel and the University of Virginia, US) have succeeded in diagnosing equine overtraining syndrome by measuring nocturnal growth hormone secretion. The results of this study offer the prospect for an improved treatment method for comparable stress related syndromes in humans, such as burnout.

Overtraining syndrome entails reduced performance despite the same or an increased level of training. The secretion of the nocturnal growth hormone is an indicator for overtraining syndrome. This hormone plays a role in both growth and stress. The researchers were able to diagnose overtraining syndrome by measuring the amount of hormone present in the horse's blood. The focus can now be placed on determining effective prevention and treatment methods.

Among the more than 200 symptoms described for overtraining syndrome among athletes, not a single one has yet been determined to be specific to the disease's clinical picture. As a result, it is still difficult to diagnose overtraining syndrome with certainty at an early stage. For humans, a Profile of Mood State (POMS) assessment tool is used to diagnose overtraining syndrome. This assessment tool measures changes in behaviour and mental state, which so far appear to be the most reliable indicators of overtraining syndrome. Further study should reveal whether measuring nocturnal growth hormone secretion, as is done with horses, can also be applied to humans to diagnose stress-related illnesses, including overtraining syndrome and burnout.

Source: Utrecht University

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Source: Archives of Internal Medicine

Home treadmills and kids don't mix!

As exercisers, we know the fitness benefits of treadmills, but if you supplement your gym or personal training hours with time spent on a home treadmill, you should be aware of the potential risks involved if you have children in the house. Treadmills in the home can be dangerous to toddlers and young children says the NSW Government Office of Fair Trading. Even parents who carefully child-proof their home may not fully realise the risks associated with treadmills.

In the last few years more than 100 Australian children have been seriously injured by treadmills at home. Most injuries happen when a baby or toddler moves to the back of the treadmill (where they are out of sight) and either touches the moving belt or gets their hand caught under it. This can result in severe friction burns that can take many months to heal, possibly requiring skin graft operations and even plastic surgery when the child is older. Unfortunately the number of accidents in NSW is growing as the sales of domestic treadmills continue to increase.

As a result the NSW Government has introduced a new safety standard which took effect from 1 June 2009, requiring all new treadmills to carry a prominent warning sticker to alert treadmill users to keep children away from machines when they are in use. Fair Trading has also developed a safety awareness education campaign warning parents and carers of the dangers associated with home treadmills, which includes the distribution of thousands of posters titled 'Treadmills and kids don't mix!' to all childcare centres, family day care, preschools, playgroups and community health and baby health centres across NSW.

Safety tips for home treadmill users

- If you can, use your treadmill in the room away from young children
- If this is not possible:
 - use safety barriers (like a playpen) to keep children away from the treadmill
 - do not use your treadmill when young children are around
- Always keep your treadmill unplugged when not in use
- Store your treadmill well away from children's reach
- Always supervise older children if they are using a treadmill
- When you buy a new treadmill choose one with protective covers and a safety stop switch.

Case study

Emily was two years old when she accidentally touched the moving belt of the family's new treadmill. In just a matter of seconds she had suffered friction burns so intense they removed tissue from the inside of three of her fingers, as well as leaving a burn across the inside of her palm. Her shocked mother recalled; 'There was no blood – it was all just white'.

As a result Emily needed treatment that included a skin graft operation, frequent bandaging, a splint and weekly visits to hospital. Almost one year later the treatment continues. She may also need plastic surgery in future, after she has stopped growing, to make sure her fingers are straight. The accident occurred in seconds but the consequences will continue for many years. If you or any of your clients use treadmills in the home and have young children in the house, always keep the kids away from the machine and make sure they cannot reach any moving part.

Source: NSW Government, Office of Fair Trading

Enjoy the moment and gain the rewards

The next time you nab the last free parking spot on the street or receive a free bikkie with your morning cappuccino, let yourself appreciate the moment. A recent US study has found that taking time to savour the good things that happen to you can increase happiness and inner strength.

For the study, conducted by Barbara Fredrickson, a professor of psychology in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina, 86 participants provided 'emotion reports' every day for a period of one-month. 'Getting those daily reports helped us gather more accurate recollections of feelings and allowed us to capture emotional ups and downs' Fredrickson said.

She continued, 'This study shows that if happiness is something you want out of life, then focusing daily on the small moments and cultivating positive emotions is the way to go. Those small moments let positive emotions blossom, and that helps you become more open. That openness then helps us build resources that can help us rebound better from adversity and stress, ward off depression and continue to grow'.

Discussing the particulars of the study findings, Fredrickson said that 'the levels of positive emotions that produced good benefits weren't extreme. Participants with average and stable levels of positive emotions still showed growth in resilience even when their days included negative emotions'.

So, we need to consciously enjoy the 'micro-moments' of happiness that can be sprinkled throughout our days, but which we often forget within a few seconds? Fredrickson believes so; 'A lot of times we get so wrapped up in thinking about the future and the past that we are blind to the goodness we are steeped in already, whether it's the beauty outside the window or the kind things that people are doing for you. The better approach is to be open and flexible, to be appreciative of whatever good you do find in your daily circumstances, rather than focusing on bigger questions'.

Source: Emotion

Dance your way to 10,000 steps

Government recommendations that we try to walk 10,000 steps each day in order to curb the nation's obesity trend are often considered very hard to meet, particularly by those who don't work on their feet all day. The key to reaching this number, then, is to find interesting ways of getting nearer to that elusive 10,000.

Two new studies suggest that dancing may be the best way of doing this, allowing dance participants to pack up to 2,000 fun-filled steps into an hour. One study conducted by researchers at the University of the Studies of Rome, Italy, found that salsa dancing could improve cardiovascular fitness, while the other study by a team from the Leeds Metropolitan University in the UK found that less vigorous ballroom dances, including the tango and the fox trot, could add over 2,000 steps to a daily walking total.

'Learning to dance can be a fun, social, local and friendly way to enjoy low-intensity physical activity and skill learning' said the author of the UK study, Stephen Cobley, a senior lecturer in skill acquisition and sport/exercise psychology at Leeds Metropolitan University.

The popularity of television shows such as "Dancing with the Stars" has brought ballroom dancing to prominence in recent years, and this prompted Cobley to conduct a study into the fitness benefits that dancing provides. He and his colleagues designed a study based upon a 12-week series of introductory ballroom dancing lessons which was offered to a group of sedentary adults.

The 27 study participants, of which 22 were women, had an average age of 53. The weekly, two-hour classes included dances such as the fox trot, the tango and the cha-cha. By taking part in the classes, the participants, who would otherwise have spent the time in sedentary pursuits, considerably increased their weekly totals of steps taken. Commenting on the study, sports and lifestyle nutritionist Molly Kimball from the Ochsner Health System in New Orleans, said, 'Ten thousand steps per day is the recommendation, but how many seniors are getting that? Two thousand steps is still good, and every little bit helps'.

The Italian study focused on salsa, a faster dance which provides a greater aerobic workout. The researchers measured oxygen consumption and heart rate in dancers who performed salsa during lessons, at night clubs or in a group dance called rueda de casino. Participating in the study were 11 pairs of dancers with an average age of 36 years. Maximum heart rate was found to increase between 58 and 75 per cent in all of the dancing groups, and oxygen consumption increased by up to 56 per cent, though the nightclub dancers appeared to provide the highest rate of aerobic activity.

Study author Gian Pietro Emerenziani, said, 'Salsa is a spirited dance. With this form of dance, you are clearly getting a workout. All three types of salsa in our study, practiced frequently, will have a positive impact on health and fitness'.

Kimball concurred, saying, 'With dancing, you don't necessarily have to go to the gym, you don't have to run in the heat, but you're still benefiting'.

Source: HealthDay News

Workout to the beat of the drum

Are you in need of some exercise inspiration to stir you from your winter slumber? Do you fancy shaking up your fitness routine with something a little different? Japanese drumming is becoming an increasingly popular way to stay fit and have fun for Sydney-siders of all ages. By pounding a 250kg Japanese drum and learning the background to the ancient art form, Japanese drumming provides a vigorous workout as well as some fun.

East and West collide with Japanese drumming. The workshops were created by Australia's taiko ensemble: 'TaikoZ' – known for blending gymnastic grace and physical prowess with the primal energy and heart-thumping beats of the

Japanese taiko (or drum). Having just headlined the Darling Harbour 21st birthday celebrations in Sydney and appeared on 'So You Think You Can Dance', TaikOz are currently enjoying great popularity and have performed in venues worldwide, including the Pompidou Centre in Paris and Japan's National Theatre in Tokyo.

Taiko drumming enables students to experience the power and strength of Japanese drumming, as well as the history and concepts behind the sacred art of 'Wadaiko' (Japanese drumming). Combining music making with an intensive, vigorous workout, taiko classes are reputed to energise, strengthen and excite participants. Lasting up to two hours, classes teach body awareness, listening, diligence and team work.

TaikOz has opened a Taiko School in Sydney which holds ten classes each week. The workshops run all year round and cater to taiko enthusiasts of all cultural backgrounds and ages. For more information, or to get involved, call 9572 8595 or visit www.taikoz.com

Source: TJC PR

Vegies to lower blood pressure

An amino acid commonly found in vegetable protein appears to lower blood pressure according to new research from the US.

Data from an international diet study involving 4,680 individuals from the US, the UK, China and Japan, showed a correlation between a 4.72 per cent higher intake of glutamic acid as a portion of total dietary protein and a 1.5 to 3-point reduction in average systolic blood pressure and a 1- to 1.6-point lower diastolic pressure.

Because high blood pressure is a strong risk factor for heart disease, even this relatively small point reduction could translate to a six per cent reduction in stroke death rates and a 4 per cent lowering of coronary heart disease deaths, according to study author Dr Jeremiah Stamler, professor emeritus of preventive medicine at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University in Chicago.

Stamler warned that the findings were not a green light for people to take glutamic acid supplements, saying, 'We make a clear statement that there are no data on supplements of glutamic acid to tell us anything one way or another about their value'.

Commenting on the relationship between lower blood pressure and higher glutamic acid intake, Ian Brown, a research associate from Imperial College London and a member of the study team, said that the results were not surprising; 'It is compatible with earlier findings that a diet high in vegetable proteins, those found in beans, whole grains, rice, soy products and bread, is associated with lower blood pressure. The solution to improving blood pressure is not based around a single nutrient. We are looking at a whole series of dietary elements that act together. Combined, they have a large effect'.

Stamler added, 'The fact that the most important amino acid in vegetable protein is related to blood pressure supports the inference that a diet high in vegetable protein and low in animal protein has favourable effects on blood pressure. We must also consider obesity, high salt intake, high alcohol intake and high potassium intake, among other risk factors'.

Summing up the fact that the study had been another example of proving what has been 'known' for years, Brown concluded; 'It's just as mothers and grandmothers have been saying for years. Eat your vegetables, avoid fatty foods, avoid excess alcohol'.

Source: Circulation

Green tea could halve stroke risk

Recent Australian research has found that consuming two cups per day of green tea could decrease an individual's risk of suffering stroke by as much as 50 per cent.

Each year, stroke is responsible for over five million deaths worldwide, and of these, ischemic stroke (stroke caused by a clot that cuts off blood to the brain) accounts for about 70 per cent.

Even one cup a day appears to reduce risk of ischemic stroke, according to researcher Professor Colin Binns, of the School of Public Health at [Curtin University](#) in Western Australia. If you're really keen on the brew then drinking more of it can increase the risk reduction to 60 per cent, but if the green stuff isn't your cup of tea (sorry), then everyday black tea also has similar, though lesser, properties.

'We can say if you are going to drink a beverage, then tea is the healthier option. We believe other kinds of tea are half as effective as green tea in reducing risk' said Binns.

The Curtin University researchers and academics from three Chinese hospitals monitored the consumption of green tea by ischemic stroke patients in Guangdong province in southern China. Four hundred stroke patients were interviewed, and the data compared with that gleaned from 400 healthy individuals in the same area. Guangdong was selected for the study because the diet of the population has remained largely the same for the past twenty years and the drinking of green tea is common practise, providing the researchers with necessary consistent factors.

Binns said that because the Western diet changes so much (comparing a shopping basket of today with one from 1989 could be an interesting task) conducting the study in Australia would be difficult, but the researchers believe that the benefits found in green tea would also apply within a western diet.

Source: *Stroke*

Soy may protect lungs

Research from Japan has suggested that regularly consuming soy products may result in improved lung function and reduced chances of developing chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

For the study, researchers led by Fumi Hirayama questioned 300 Japanese COPD patients and 340 age-matched healthy individuals about their intake of soy products, such as tofu and soy milk.

Ninety-per cent of cases of COPD, characterised by a progressive decline in lung function and including chronic bronchitis and emphysema, is caused by long-term smoking.

Although the pros and cons of soy are continually researched and debated, with previous studies linking soy to reduced cholesterol and easing of menopause symptoms, the Japanese study is the first to link soy intake with reduced risk of COPD.

'It has been suggested that flavonoids from soy foods act as an anti-inflammatory agent in the lung, and can protect against tobacco carcinogens for smokers. However, further research is needed to understand the underlying biological mechanism' said Hirayama.

Source: *Respiratory Research*

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Ride on! Around the Bay in a Day

In its 17th year, Australia's premier cycling challenge event, Around the Bay in a Day 2009, is set to put people of all ages and fitness levels to the test as they pedal to victory in Victoria.

Around the Bay in a Day Event Manager Eleni Koronakos said the event has evolved in line with the increasing popularity in recreational cycling; 'More people cycling means more people want to be challenged on their bike. Around the Bay in a Day offers a challenge to every cyclist with an offering of five very different ride options from 50km to 250km' she said.

For the serious cyclist, there is the 250km or 210km lap and with no shortcuts across Port Phillip Bay it's a challenging ride that can take you to a new level of cycling. For those who haven't got time to train all winter, or are just getting back on the bike and want a challenge, there is the 100km ride from Sorrento to Melbourne.

For a more social outing there is the 50km ride option which takes you over the Westgate Bridge twice, the only event in Melbourne to offer this. And, after the success of its debut last year, the 80km School Challenge is back, taking school kids from Melbourne to Patterson River return.

Riders are also encouraged to take on the charity challenge and get sponsored for The Smith Family, the event's official charity partner; 'We urge all riders to seek sponsorship from their friends, family and colleagues to help support disadvantaged Australian children' Koronakos said.

The Smith Family fundraising target for 2009 is \$1million, with 100 per cent of funds raised going to their Learning for Life suite of education programs. This target will go to assisting over 3,000 disadvantaged Australian primary school children with education and learning opportunities which help break the cycle of disadvantage.

To get involved in this fitness challenge, or for more information about Around the Bay in a Day, visit www.aroundthebay.com.au or call 1800 616 600

Source: Bicycle Victoria

Roll up! Roll up! Auditions for circus students in 2010

The National Institute of Circus Arts (NICA), described by Paul Kooperman of the Australian Stage as 'the future of circus', is urging aspiring circus performers to submit their applications for entry into the 2010 Bachelor of Circus Arts course by 4 September 2009.

From 25 September 2009, NICA trainers will visit each state to hold auditions. Those with a flair for the physical and a desire for a challenge will have the opportunity to apply for the course, with successful applicants participating in the three-year full time degree, conferred by Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.

NICA's 'Bachelor of Circus Arts' is the only circus degree of its kind available for study in Australia, and attracts applicants from across Australia and overseas. Applicants must have completed Year 12 or equivalent to be eligible for this program.

NICA director and CEO, Pamela Creed, said that the NICA Bachelor of Circus Arts course is for young people with a background in physical training such as circus, sport, dance, physical theatre, gymnastics, acrobatics, martial arts, diving or trampoline; 'I am always surprised by the diversity of circus performers' backgrounds and I encourage those seeking an exciting international circus career to apply' she said.

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NICA graduates are highly employable, knowledgeable and creative, with awe-inspiring circus and performance skills. Graduates have gone on to establish careers in Australia and internationally in acclaimed companies including Cirque du Soleil and Australia's own Circus Oz. Some students have gone on to form their own companies and tour the world to perform in prestigious festivals.

Over sixty young people currently study at NICA's facility in Melbourne. Auditions for entry into the Bachelor of Circus Arts in 2010 are being held in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth in September and October.

So, if you think that the circus life is for you, register for an audition via the NICA website at www.nica.com.au or by phoning NICA on 03 9214 6975.

Source: Mollison Communications