

## Gym'll fix it? No, just reach for the stairs

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### Lucy Atkins on a lifestyle approach to exercise that takes the sweat out of getting fit

It is fabulous news for those of us who have already allowed our gym-going resolutions to crumble: exercise is out. At least, exercise of the kind we associate with treadmills, boot camps and personal trainers.



The long hours at the gym may be over forever

For a study recently published in The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition reports that three 10-minute bursts of activity spread over your day can have the same beneficial effects as doing 30 minutes of exercise in one go. This lifestyle approach to fitness, now called "Integrative Exercise", was recently heralded by The New York Times as a hot trend for 2006.

Certainly, moving around more would be a good idea for most of us. According to the Department of Health, only 31 per cent of adults are sufficiently active to feel any health benefits. Indeed, our sloth costs the Government about £8.2 billion a year in health care, and in general we are now three times as fat as we were in the 1980s.

The notion of activity rather than gym-going is central to many recent diet bestsellers. In last year's hit, French Women Don't Get Fat, Mireille Guiliano pointed out that French women are never found on treadmills. Instead, they walk everywhere and take the stairs. This year, Naomi Moryama published Japanese Women Don't Get Old or Fat, in which she says that Japanese women, with the "lowest obesity rates in the developed world", stay fit by cycling everywhere.

Could this really be true? Rose Thomas, a British GP who lived in Tokyo for four years, says: "I suppose I was healthier when we lived there, because I did cycle everywhere. But I wasn't any lighter than I am now. Japanese people actually eat quite a lot of fried noodles."

Noodles aside, however, the general principle of integrating activity into your everyday life is officially a good one. "Five or 10 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise done several times a day will give you excellent fitness benefits," says Simon Till, chair of the British Association of Sports Medicine and consultant physician in sports medicine at Sheffield Teaching Hospitals Trust.

"We are not talking about exercise, really, but simply being more active: doing things like walking briskly to the paper shop instead of driving."

If you do this properly - that is, genuinely raise your heart rate sufficiently while you are being "active" - you really can give up the gym. Just three 10-minute bursts of moderate-intensity exercise daily, says Dr Till, "will improve your cardiovascular and respiratory health, lower your risk of diabetes and other diseases and improve your longevity, irrespective of whether you lose weight".

Weight loss is what most of us really want from our fitness regimes. And this is where the benefits of integrative exercise become slightly less precise. "If you are starting at zero [you are currently inactive] and are not eating more than usual, I would be amazed if you didn't lose some weight," says Dr Till. However "everybody has different starting points and every metabolism is different. If you are 18 stone and walk for 30 minutes you will burn more calories than an 11-stone person would." In other words, you have to try it and see.

What is more, integrative exercise is not quite as commitment-free as it sounds. When you go out to get your newspaper, for instance, you have to walk at three or four miles per hour (depending on how fit you are). This involves moving your legs and arms pretty fast, which is something you have to think about, and several times a day. It is a mental as well as a physical effort.

The key to success with integrative exercise is changing your outlook: you have to become the sort of person who takes the stairs, runs for the bus or walks over to a colleague's desk instead of emailing him. However, it is not easy to change how you think about exercise, says exercise psychologist Andy Barton, a sports motivation specialist. "If you tell yourself at the outset that you will lose two stone this way, you are likely to lose motivation."

Instead, Barton advises: "Break your overall goal down into achievable mini-goals. This way you won't give up on the whole idea of integrative exercise the first day you fail to do it."

Your colleagues may initially seem alarmed as you sprint from desk to coffee machine. But press on and this "active lifestyle" approach will, says Dr Till, be "genuinely valuable" to your physical health. And it might just help your bank balance, too.

## **The Talk Test**

"Moderate intensity" activities stimulate the body's cardiorespiratory, musculoskeletal and metabolic systems - ie, they make you fitter. You do not need complex calculations to assess the intensity of your activity. Instead, use the "talk test": if you can no longer comfortably hold a sustained conversation during your activity, it means you are working at a rate that has health benefits.

## **Six Integrative Exercise ('moderate intensity') ideas**

- 1 Hoovering with gusto.
  - 2 Gardening - particularly sweeping, raking and mowing.
  - 3 Physical games with children such as football, roughhousing and chasing.
  - 4 Climbing stairs: never take the lift.
  - 5 Taking a brisk walk (3-4 mph) for 10 minutes a day in your lunch hour.
  - 6 Moving whenever possible: fidget; pace around while you are on the phone; walk to a colleague's desk to talk instead of emailing.
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