

Good Health

EXERCISE won't just help you maintain a healthy weight, it could be the single most important step you can take for your mental and physical health, and the best way possible to keep the effects of ageing under control.

By **LOUISE ATKINSON**

TWENTIES

THIS should be your physical peak, but be warned, the ageing process kicks in at 25, as you start to lose muscle mass at a rate of up to 1 per cent a year.

Challenge: bleep test

THIS involves running between two points, getting faster as you progress. The aim is to keep going for as long as possible. This is a widely accepted test of cardiovascular fitness.

Download the bleep test app on your mobile phone (it's free), then set two markers exactly 20m apart. Start the app and jog gently to the first marker, jog back when you hear the bleep, then back to the first marker, aiming to arrive at each marker in time for the bleep.

The test starts comfortably slowly, but with each minute, the bleeps get closer together.

When you can no longer reach the marker before you hear the bleep, stop and check your score.

A good score is level 10-11, excellent is 12-13. If you can reach only level 5 (or less), you could certainly benefit from getting regular exercise into your life.

YOUR EXERCISE AIM: 'This is a crucial decade for building good exercise habits, muscle mass and bone density — which fall away in later life — while you have time and optimal health,' says physiotherapist Sammy Margo.

She recommends experimenting with a range of sports and exercise classes: 'Aim for at least five 40-minute sessions, mixing cardiovascular work with strength training.'

'But don't just fall into a pattern of endless cardio and crunches,' she warns, recommending you add some strength training (squats, press-ups and lunges, which work the main muscle groups).

Repeat the test every three months, with the aim of improving your result each time.

FORTIES

THIS is the decade of the triple whammy: hormonal decline, gravity pulling everything south and more slowing of your metabolism as the decline in muscle mass slowly accelerates (metabolism slows because muscle burns more fat as fuel). As a result, we put on weight.

Challenge: step test

THIS is a step-up exercise — you will need a high step that's 12in above the ground. Warm up for ten minutes by marching on the spot swinging your arms, then start a stopwatch and simply step up on to the step and off again, one foot at a time, for three minutes.

IT'S an easy rhythm to get into, but you may find it a help to do it in time with a metronome or a mobile app that provides bleeps at set times — try Interval Timer or Seconds Timer, both free from iTunes, set to 24 bleeps per minute. (One step up, one down, per bleep.) Or for a less high-tech alternative, you could count the seconds in your head (saying: 'One elephant (up), two elephant (down)', for example, for each second).

Then measure your heart-rate in beats per minute by counting the pulse in your wrist. In your 40s to 60s, men should be 90 to 95 and women 95 to 100.

'This test seems simple, but it is a great measure of fitness, balance, agility and rhythm,' says Sammy Margo.

EXERCISE AIM: 'This is a challenging decade as most people are torn between the demands of young children and ageing parents,' says Sammy Margo, 'but it is important to integrate activity into every opportunity throughout the day to hold back the effects of ageing.'

She recommends including stretching and flexibility exercises in your regimen, too. A study last month, in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, found that men in their 40s who do 30 minutes of physical activity — irrespective of its intensity — six days a week, have a 40 per cent lower risk of dying from any cause before 70.

The researchers found that boosting physical activity levels in this decade is as good for your health as giving up smoking. Strength training (working with weights, or performing exercises such as squats and lunges) is also increasingly important now.

'The only way to boost your metabolic rate is to prevent muscle depletion by strength training,' says Dr Miriam Nelson, professor of nutrition and a specialist in physical activity at Tufts University, Massachusetts, who conducted a study of 40 post-menopausal women, encouraging them to follow a programme of strength training twice a week for 30 minutes.

'After a year their bodies had become 15 to 30 years younger,' she says, 'and all the participants regained bone density instead of losing it, as women normally do at that age.'

Find a good strength and conditioning exercise class (circuit training or kettlebells for instance), or DVD such as Davina: Fit In 15 (£5 from Tesco).

FIFTIES

THIS can be a decade of unfamiliar aches and pains. Even someone with previously healthy blood pressure may notice their readings creeping up, as ageing arteries stiffen.

But exercise can help. Studies (from

THIRTIES

FOR many women, this decade is dominated by pregnancy and young motherhood, and hormonal changes can throw up problems. 'I see an increasing number of pregnancy-related back pain problems from women who have lived sedentary lives,' warns Sammy Margo.

However, men and women who are active could be at particular risk of over-use injuries in this decade, says Dr Mark Hamer, an exercise physiologist at University College London. This includes damage to the cartilage which cushions the joints.

Challenge: run a mile

TRY to complete the distance in nine minutes for a woman, eight for a man; this puts you well into the top 50 per cent for your age group.

A study by the Cooper Institute in Dallas, Texas, showed that the speed you can run a mile by the age of 40 could become a spooky prediction of your risk of heart disease years later. If you take longer than ten minutes (12 minutes for women), you have a 30 per cent greater risk of developing and dying from heart disease in 30 years' time.

EXERCISE AIM: Keeping fit now means working harder than in your 20s. If you haven't already, take time to find a sport or activity you enjoy and which you can fit around the other demands on your time (cycle to work; book an exercise class three evenings a week).

Make activity part of your life — stand instead of sitting, take stairs not lifts, never stand still on an escalator and pay attention to your posture.

As well as doing at least two-and-a-half hours exercise a week, Sammy Margo recommends speeding up your mile: start by walking fast, break into jogging intervals as your fitness increases, then run when you can.

the American Heart Association) show that regular physical activity (30 minutes most days of the week) can cut high blood pressure risk by a fifth compared with people who exercise for less than one hour a week.

Challenge: sit/rise test

STAND in front of a mirror in comfortable clothes with your shoes off. Simply lower yourself into a cross-legged sitting position on the floor without using your hands for support or kneeling on the way down, then return to a standing position without using your hands, knees or arms for support.

Score your efforts out of ten, subtracting one point every time you have to use a hand or knee for support, and half a point every time you lose balance or wobble. Aim to score eight or above.

In a study in the European Journal of Preventive Cardiology last year, researchers found that people aged between 50 and 80 who scored less than eight were twice as likely to die within the next six years compared to people with perfect scores.

In fact, they found every point increase in the test is linked to a 21 per cent decrease in mortality from all causes.

Be warned — this test may take practise, and is not recommended for anyone with arthritic knees.

EXERCISE AIM: Aim to achieve the recommended two-and-a-half hours' activity a week in any way you can. Consider investing in a pedometer and reaching at least 10,000 steps per day.

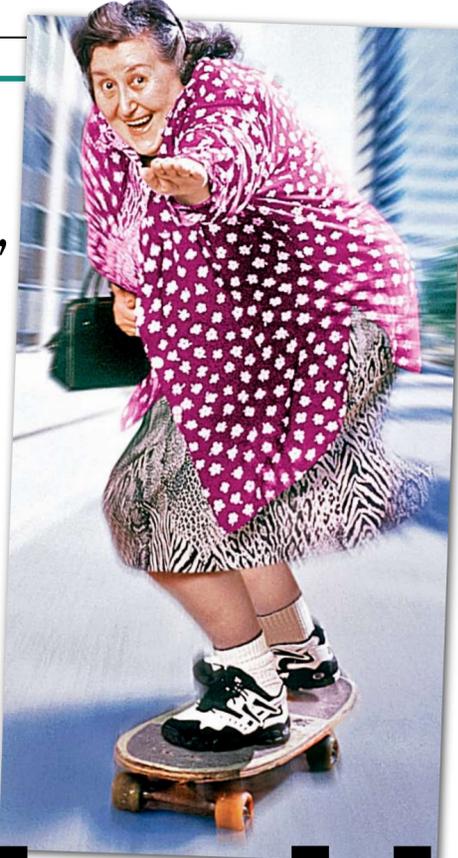
You don't have to join a gym. Studies show exercise such as cycling, swimming, dancing (and even mowing the lawn) can be as effective at lowering blood pressure as medication.

'Weight-bearing exercise (performed standing up) will help reduce bone loss as you age, as well as increase your metabolism,' says Sammy Margo.

The National Osteoporosis Society recommends short exercise sessions

From how quickly you get up from a chair to running a mile, take our test to find out...

Are YOU as FIT as you should be for your AGE?



under the microscope

Actress, singer and author **Clare Grogan, 53, answers our health quiz**



CAN YOU RUN UP THE STAIRS?

WELL I run five miles, five times a week — I've been doing this for a very long time. It's important for my mental health, as it's my 'me' time. I'm absolutely religious about running, even when on holiday. It's funny because I was one of those girls at school who hated PE — probably because of the constant horizontal rain out on the fields — but as soon as I left school, I got interested in keeping fit.

EVER DIETED?

NO, I've never really felt the need and I never weigh myself. I married a foodie and restaurant owner (Stephen Lironi), so I do try to cook everything from scratch. But I'm not totally virtuous — I drink cocktails, eat cake and love ice cream. When I'm busy I'm not as conscientious about eating healthily, but I try and make the time. I love Spanish food and great seafood — I couldn't live without fresh fish.

TAKE ANY VITAMINS?

WHEN I'm really run down, I always turn to an old-fashioned syrupy tonic called Floradix — which contains iron and B vitamins to boost your energy levels.

ANY FAMILY AILMENTS?

THANKFULLY not. There's no history of serious disease, so I consider myself lucky. My mum died at 80, from old age. My dad is still alive and kicking — he's 87 and still lives in his own flat.

COPE WELL WITH PAIN?

UNFORTUNATELY, I haven't been put to the ultimate test of childbirth, but I think because of my Scottish upbringing, I'm pretty hardy.

WORST ILLNESS?

I WAS at my lowest point after suffering six miscarriages in my late 30s and several rounds of unsuccessful IVF afterwards. I felt like my body had let me down and the emotional pain was unbearable. Finding hope at such a dark time is very difficult, especially if your friends are going through natural pregnancies. Thank God for adoption in our case! Our beautiful daughter Ellie is now ten.

ANY INJURIES?

I WAS hit by a bottle when I was 17, leaving me with a 4in scar on the left side of my face near my eye. As an actress, keeping it is about making a little statement — I like imperfection, but it has caused me problems. In my 30s, a lump developed on the scar and it turned out not all of the glass had been removed and it was moving to the surface of my skin, jeopardising my eyesight and causing nerve damage. I had surgery to reopen the scar and they removed a large piece of glass. It was a straightforward procedure, but the physical and mental recovery took about six months. It was literally reopening an old wound.

HANGOVER CURE?

EGGS and hair of the dog — like a great Bloody Mary.

SLEEP WELL?

I'M VERY erratic. I love my clean sheets — I find I fall asleep much quicker if they're fresh. But I often have an anxiety hour where I wake at 4am, worrying. I'm in bed most nights by 10.30pm and I love to rise early because it means I can cram more into my day.

LIKE TO LIVE FOR EVER?

I THINK it would be too exhausting! ■ CLARE'S new children's book, *Tallulah On Tour*, is available now from the Kinde store.

Interview by SARAH EWING

Glasgow Caledonian University. Even if you have been inactive for many decades, gentle activity now can reverse the decline.

Challenge: 'Up and go'

MEASURE a 10ft (3m) distance and place a dining room chair at one end. Ask a friend to stand at the other end with a stopwatch.

Sit yourself comfortably on the chair, get the friend to start the timer, then get up, walk the distance, walk back and sit down again. The clock stops the moment your bottom hits the chair.

A score of 12 seconds or less is excellent, if you score 13 to 20 seconds your balance could be impaired, 20 seconds plus could indicate problems with mobility.

YOUR EXERCISE AIM: Physiotherapist Vicki Johnston recommends practising this at every opportunity.

'If you're watching TV, get up every time the ads come on, and lower yourself slowly when you sit back down, to work your muscles against gravity. If you slump back with an audible "oof", it means you have not engaged your muscles and controlled your descent,' she says.

Aim to be active. 'Do something that gets you breathing a little more deeply than normal — for ten minutes three times a day, five days a week,' she says.

'This could just mean marching on the spot while you're washing up or getting off the bus one stop earlier than usual.'

She also advises regular balance work — either through tai chi classes, or single leg stands. 'Balancing involves co-ordination of sensations and muscles in the ankles and hips; this will make you more stable on uneven ground, or on a moving bus or train.'

Protect your knees by strengthening the muscles in the front of your thigh with seated leg extensions.

Sitting on a chair, straighten your legs in front of you, hold for five seconds and then slowly return to the starting point. Repeat 12 to 15 times.

which 'jolt' the skeleton — e.g., running or jumping — to strengthen bones. A recent study in the Journal of Sport and Health Science found that women burned more calories during the dance-fitness class Zumba compared with salsa dancing, though both offer a great boost to cardiovascular fitness and psychological well-being.

SIXTIES

IN YOUR 60s, wear and tear on your joints may become more apparent with arthritis. Studies show one in three people over 60 suffer a fall each year, and, according to Sammy Margo, muscle weakness and impaired balance are key risk factors. 'You'll see a rapid decline in bone density,' she says, 'so a simple trip-up could have dramatic implications.'

Challenge: chair test

SIT comfortably on a dining room chair, your feet planted firmly on

the ground. Set a stopwatch, and simply stand without using your hands or arms for support, then sit again gently as many times as you can in 30 seconds. Healthy women in their 60s should be able to achieve at least 12 and men 14.

If you find this easy, progress to a softer, lower easy-chair which demands greater strength and balance to get up from and down without support, and see how many times you can get up and down out of the chair in 30 seconds.

YOUR EXERCISE AIM: Adapting a workout routine for the 60s may mean curtailing aerobic exercise that jars and stresses the joints. So replace long runs with shorter jogging stints, cycling or power-walking and swimming.

Strength training is still important, as are stretching and balance exercises. If you are new to exercise ask at your local health centre about age-specific classes; aquarobics is an excellent gentle workout. Aim to practise the test



ing at least 10,000 steps per day. You don't have to join a gym. Studies show exercise such as cycling, swimming, dancing (and even mowing the lawn) can be as effective at lowering blood pressure as medication. 'Weight-bearing exercise (performed standing up) will help reduce bone loss as you age, as well as increase your metabolism,' says Sammy Margo. The National Osteoporosis Society recommends short exercise sessions