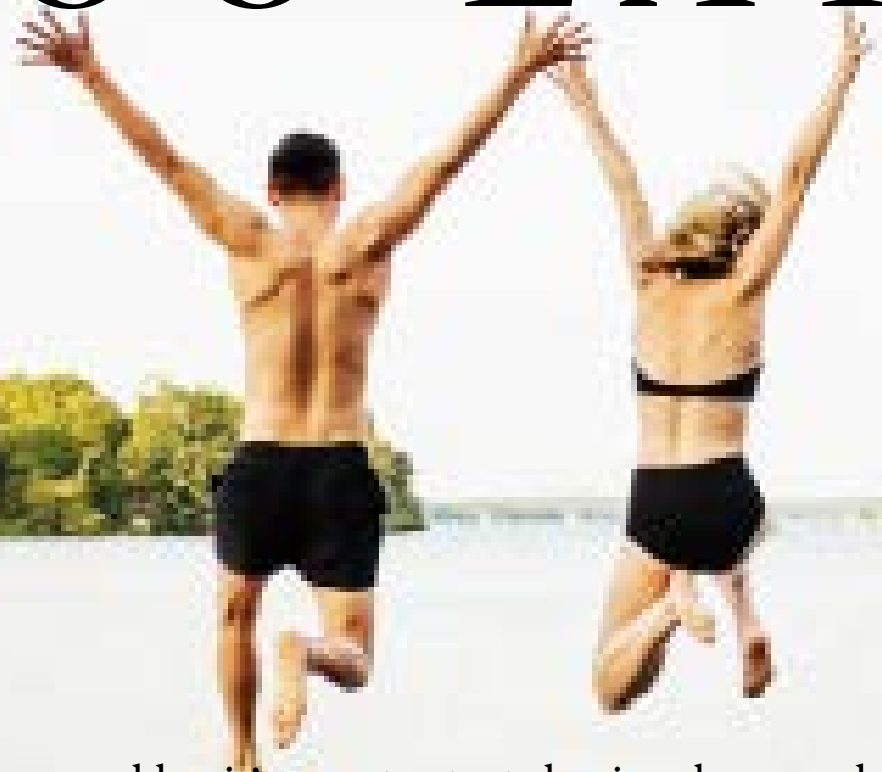


IT'S NEVER TOO LATE



As we grow older, it's easy to start slowing down and putting our feet up. But if we choose to exercise and eat well, we will reap the benefits over the coming decades. **Louise Atkinson** finds out more



We're always being told that a healthy diet and regular exercise is great for our health, but what if you've got to your 50s, 60s or even your 70s without stomping through a single Zumba class, picking up a tennis racquet, 'feeling the burn' or contemplating swapping your morning cornflakes for a tangy green smoothie?

Well, the good news is it's *never* too late to start, and all the science shows you could start seeing life-extending health improvements almost immediately.

Take cigarettes, for instance. Even if you've smoked for decades, once you quit, your risk of heart attack starts dropping from day one. Within a month, your lung function will show improvements, and after a year your risk of heart disease is cut in half. Stay clear of cigarettes for 15 years and your risk of death from smoking-related causes will be the same as a lifelong non-smoker.

It's a similar story with exercise. A study by the University of Cambridge in 2019 found that getting physically active for the first time during middle age is associated with a significantly lower risk of death 'regardless of past activity levels or existing health conditions'.

In fact, just adding in a 10-minute walk each day if you're among the one in four UK adults labelled as 'chronically inactive' is enough to boost physical fitness, improve mood and quality of life, aid weight maintenance and promise a 15% reduction



'The health benefits of boosting your plant intake are dramatic and measurable'

in early death, according to Public Health England. The survey also found that if you can find the time and inclination for 30 minutes of moderate exercise every day you could cut your death risk by almost half. Regular exercise will help to protect your brain against dementia, too. A long-term study led by a team at University College London found that

people who exercise as they age are more likely to have good brain health than sporadic exercisers, and that even taking up exercise in your 60s has a measurably positive impact on our capacity to learn, process information, make decisions and remember details. According to lead study author Dr Sarah-Naomi James: 'People who have never been active before, and then start to be active in their 60s, appear to have better cognitive function than those who were never active.'

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

Exercise is clearly important, but it is only one part of the equation. Studies by Tim Spector, Professor of Genetic Epidemiology at King's College London, and his team have shown that the typical modern diet of highly processed foods creates a state of damaging inflammation in the body, which can be almost instantly quelled when you remove the refined carbohydrates causing blood sugar spikes, cut out the harmful fats which build up in the blood, and instead pile your plate with a wide variety of vegetables, nut and seeds. Countless studies have shown that the health benefits of boosting your plant intake are dramatic. In a new piece of research, scientists found that switching to a plant-based diet (that is, plant-rich rather than plants-only) with fewer processed carbohydrates and unhealthy fats in conjunction with regular exercise could actually *reverse* the hardening of the arteries that leads to heart disease within a year. ►

‘There’s nothing we can do about age, but what we can control is the trajectory of our ageing’

And all of the benefits apply even if you’re already living with long-term conditions such as diabetes, depression or high blood pressure. A major new study that drew on data from half a million people found that even those in middle age with multiple long-term health conditions can expect to live longer (by at least seven years) if they switch to regular exercise and a balanced diet.

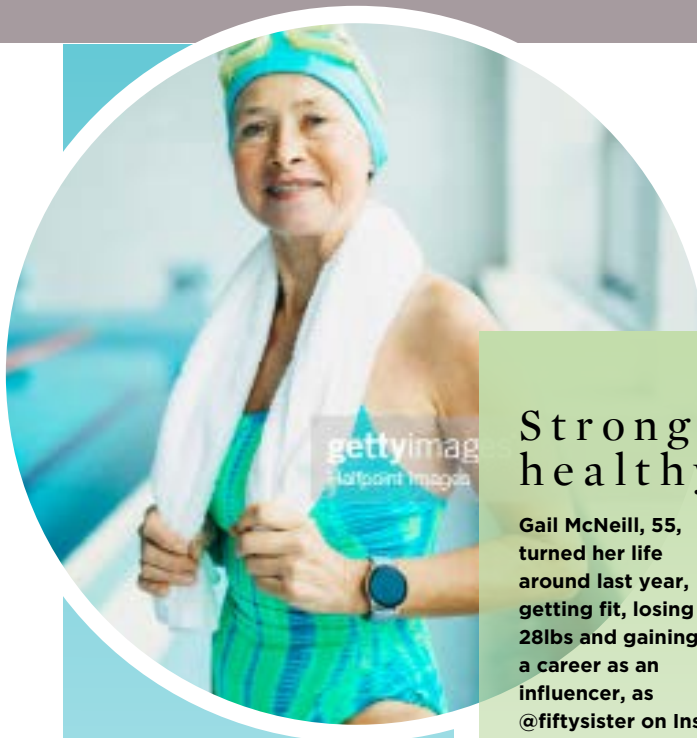
TAKING ACTION

One shining example of the ‘it’s never too late’ mantra in action is Dr Norman Lazarus, a medical scientist who turned his unhealthy lifestyle around at the age of 54, taking up cycling and making significant adjustments to his diet. Now in his late 80s, he is fighting fit and actively involved in research as Professor at the Centre for Human and Applied Physiological Sciences at King’s College London. His book *The Lazarus Strategy: How to Age Well and Wisely* (Yellow Kite, £9.99) has done much to encourage others to embrace exercise and healthy eating, no matter what their age.

‘There’s nothing we can do about age, but what we can do is control the trajectory of our ageing,’ he explains. ‘We don’t need to go down that path getting all those ageing diseases and we can avoid them by changing our lifestyle.’ The decision of how we age, he states, is in our hands and will determine ‘whether we live an active, productive and independent old age’.

He advocates three key ingredients for a healthier old age: physical activity (finding a form of exercise that you can enjoy doing for the rest of your life), good food (eating healthily and not in excess), and maintaining a positive mental attitude by enjoying what you do.

His exercise of choice is endurance cycling. In 2018 he published a study which showed that he and fellow veteran long-distance cyclists aged between 55 and 79 had the immune systems of 20-year-olds and the body fat of teenagers. For them, lifestyle changes had bucked the trend that age brings disease. ‘The message is clear,’ he says. ‘Go out and move. If you have not previously been using your physiological gifts, you will be surprised by how quickly your body will respond. Muscles, lungs, heart and mind will figuratively love you. In other words, you will begin to love yourself.’ ■



Strong and healthy

Gail McNeill, 55, turned her life around last year, getting fit, losing 28lbs and gaining a career as an influencer, as



@fiftysister on Instagram.

‘It was footage of me in a bikini which spurred me to research the health benefits of fasting. I didn’t want to be skinny, but I did want to be healthy enough to avoid as many of the preventable diseases as I could, and also to be strong and happy. My first big change was switching to two meals a day: I have breakfast at 8am and lunch at 1pm, then ‘fast’ until the morning. It was tricky at first, but now I prefer going to bed with an empty stomach. Once I’d lost 28lbs, I decided to take up skipping to get fit. Now I exercise daily for 25 minutes – fast skipping combined with weight training. Now I can honestly say I’m healthier than I’ve ever been. In fact, I’ve got the same energy and lightness of mood and mind as I had in my teens.’

Saved by exercise

‘I started exercising when I was 48, and it changed my life,’ says Jo Moseley, 58, from Yorkshire.



‘In my late 40s, I felt physically and mentally exhausted; riddled with anxiety and stress. A friend lent me an old indoor rowing machine, as she thought exercise might help, and I enjoyed it so much I set myself the challenge of rowing 1,000km to raise funds for Macmillan Cancer Support to mark my 50th birthday. Inspired, I started sea swimming, ultimately qualifying as a lifeguard, and took up paddleboarding; three years later, at the age of 54, I became the first woman to paddle coast to coast. But perhaps the most surprising benefit of exercise has been to my mental and emotional health. Throughout my 40s, I doubted myself and my contribution to the world. But exercise has given me courage, an opportunity to believe in me, and to achieve things I never imagined would be possible. I’m so grateful that I discovered the joy of moving.’

