

Recession-proofing health

Keeping fit and healthy doesn't have to be about spending hours in the gym, Catherine Heffernan suggests ways in which councils and individuals can ensure active, healthy lives even in hard times.

With the advent of email, my post has been reduced to a bundle of bank statements. Even then my bank does not love me. My jaw hit the floor at the 0.5% interest rate my savings account was yielding me.

"Half a percent!" I said dumbfounded at my bank manager.

"You're doing better than most", she replied. "Many are on 0.1%".

"But that's lower than inflation!" I exclaimed. "My money is losing money!"

She just shrugged. "That's the way it is. It is a recession."

"What about all those people who are out of a job and have to live off their life savings?"

"Well, it's a good job they saved."

It was then it hit me. Health works the same way. When times are good, people live it up. Smoking, alcohol, fatty diets and sedate lifestyles are indulged. Then the rainy day comes. The bank of life starts foreclosing its loan. Diabetes, stroke, cancer or coronary heart disease hit. It is too late to look for deals. So what can you do? It is inevitable that age will catch up with you and much talk abounds about it 'being in the genes'. However, you can recession proof your health. It is the interaction between genes, lifestyle and environment that triggers chronic disease. Modify your lifestyle and environment and you can prevent the disease.

A simple rule to remember is "5 a day, 5 a week". 'Five a day' is of course, the five portions of fruit and vegetables we should be having every day. Easy to remember but often difficult to do. This is especially so when school and work canteens offer a poor choice or when people live far away from grocery stores. It has been shown over and over that the lower the socio-economic area, the paucity of available health foods. Ideally, new council housing should be close to healthy food supplies and community initiatives to promote home cooking and a culture of healthy eating should be encouraged and supported by local authorities.

'Five a week' refers to the recommended number of exercise sessions people should be doing. Adults need to do five sessions of 30 minutes of medium impact exercise (e.g. brisk walking) a week and children are to do at least five hourly sessions. Physical inactivity alongside smoking and an unhealthy diet, is a major cause of chronic disease.

Adults who are physically active have 20 to 30% reduced risk of premature death and up to 50% reduced risk of developing the major chronic diseases such as diabetes, musculoskeletal health, cancer, cardiovascular disease and mental illness.

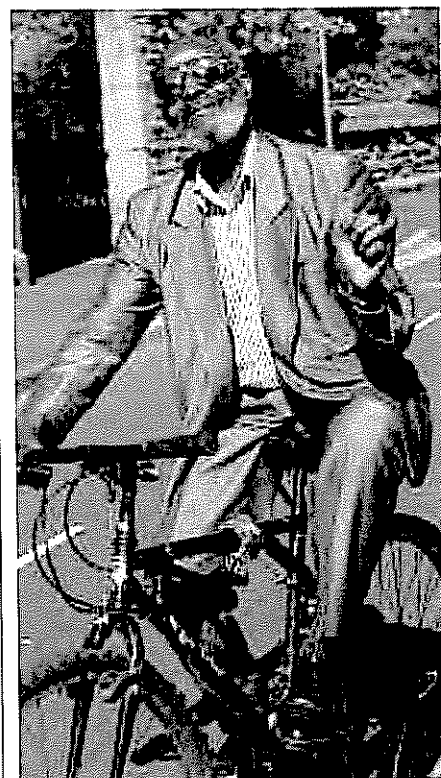
Physical activity can also bring other benefits to the wider economy through reduced sickness leave and increased productivity. Among the elderly, exercise reduces falls, increases ability to live independently and improves quality of life and social engagement. This also saves on the costs of care.

A new national plan - *Be Active, Be Healthy* - has been developed for England. This focuses on changing the environments that inhibit healthy and active lifestyles. Local authorities and the NHS are committing to joint action on town planning, making neighbourhoods more livable and more conducive to physical activity. Cycling is one such example. Efforts to make roads safer and production of cycling lanes are great ways to improve health. Transport is often the only way people can get exercise in the city. Walking and cycling to work is easier for people to slot into their schedules rather than driving to a gym five times a week. Apart from the expense and the at least two hours people will have to allocate a day to it, it is not a sustainable health promotion. A director of public health estimated that for 300,000 people electing to get their exercise by swimming five times a week, it would take 140 swimming pools operating 47 weeks a year for 16 hours a day.

Councils should work to make the environment more amenable to exercise, making it easier for the population to do. This can be done by investing in extending the range of exercise classes local authorities provide. Most councils I have come across put on educational courses for their populations.

However, aerobics classes are few and far between. These should not be the domain of elite expensive gyms. Aerobics and dance classes are fun and sociable ways for people, especially women, to get physically fit. I know lots of women who would love to pick 'n mix their pilates and aerobics classes without having to commit to what they call 'hardcore' gyms. They would also like them in nearby community centres, where they can get to them easily between family commitments. More importantly the classes need to be affordable.

In relation to walking, ensuring well-lit safe paths are crucial. Sign post a mile or three mile loop - either along a river or around a block. This makes it visible. In New York and in Ireland, disused railway tracks have been converted into walkways. These have been very popular as people know how long it takes to walk the track and can slot it into their evening or lunchtime routines. Another way councils can help is by supporting local youth clubs, maintaining the use of public badminton and tennis courts etc, promoting local walking groups or by facilitating football fields. There has been a culture of sport and exercise in the UK for a long time. With the 2012 Olympics coming up, it is time to renew that tradition. As the saying goes, "If you build it, they will come." Invest now and we can sustain our health for the future.



ASTORIA DEL BUONO/JOHN HINDS/ALAMY PRESS ASSOCIATION LIMITED