

Get up off the couch and add days to your life

Health professionals say the older generations are not exercising enough. But DICK LUMSDEN asks if it really matters

APPARENTLY, more than half of us over the age of 55 don't take enough exercise and some day we're all going to live to regret it! A report in the respected medical journal *The Lancet*, says that "physical inactivity" is as deadly as smoking, and indirectly, leads to almost one in ten of all deaths.

So...we're all going to die...and for those of us who never break sweat, it could be sooner rather than later. Scary stuff.

But before you start to panic, I've been doing a bit more digging behind the headlines and, like 99.9% of all these statistics, it may not be as bad as it sounds.

The research reported in *The Lancet* drew the conclusion that older adults who do not take any form of exercise are more at risk of coronary heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and various forms of cancer.

But here's the kicker... their findings were that if "physical inactivity" was eliminated, life expectancy "could" increase by between .41 and .95 of a year. Err, that's between 149 and 346 days.

So. By doing nothing, I could live another 20 years or so. By exercising to the NHS guidelines or more, I might add another few weeks on at the end - assuming I was still fit enough.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not advocating the life of a couch potato, and I encourage all of you to be as active as possible while you can - not because you'll "gain" a few extra weeks in your dotage, but because you'll get more out of life now.

But I'm not sure the NHS is really in touch with reality here. On their website at www.nhs.co.uk they say that adults - including those of us in the older age groups - should do at least two and a half hours of "moderate-intensity aerobic exercise" every week - or about 20 minutes a day.

That doesn't sound too bad, and I'm sure my 1.5 mile walk to Manningtree Station every day gets me an NHS tick. But I'm a bit sceptical about some of their other recommended exercises for the over 65s. In what possible way can they see canoeing, volleyball and pushing a lawn mower as either equivalent or practical alternatives?

I find it incredible that someone, somewhere in the bureaucratic corridors of the NHS, actually got down and seriously



LOOKING GOOD; FEELING GREAT: Longevity may not be greatly increased by cavorting on an exercise mat, Dick Lumsden calculates.

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practical difficulty of storing it in the cupboard under the stairs, have they any idea how painful it is to kneel down at that age?

The NHS alternative to the 2.5 hours of "moderate" activity is 75 minutes of "intense" activity a week - and here they list football, hockey, rugby and martial arts as possible activities to consider.

Now, I know that there are a sizeable number of people over 65 still playing for veterans teams in most sports, but 100 per cent of them will have been playing their chosen sport from a young age.

The likelihood of taking up a high intensity team sport at that age for the first time without the risk of serious injury or becoming a mortality statistic is pretty remote I should think.

And martial arts. Really? I would think Origami would be a much safer alternative to Kung Fu

a compromise here. If the only time your heart rate rises and you break out in a sweat is when the credit card bills arrive each month, then yes, you need to have a think about your lifestyle.

If, like me, you wake up each morning and struggle to walk to the bathroom because your ankles have seized up, and reaching down to tie shoelaces is akin to an Olympic event, then maybe you need to think about some gentle stretching now and again.

But the last thing you want to do is spend some of your hard earned money on a canoe and throw yourself into Alton Water on a cold and miserable weekend just to follow some questionable NHS advice.

Or even worse, enrol in a martial arts class and have some over eager instructor make you

Personally, I favour the advice of Scottish comedian Billy Connolly, who is 70 next month and has just been asked to become an ambassador for the charity Age Scotland.

His two golden nuggets for avoiding growing old are "Don't wear baggy trousers or beige shirts - and have sex as often as you can".

Interestingly the NHS list doesn't include sex as an activity, but if it gets the heart rate going and counts towards your 2.5 hours a week it could add days to your life. Just don't try it in a canoe!

■ Dick Lumsden is Managing Director of Owl Marketing Solutions, a specialist in marketing and advertising to older consumers. If you have any views on this article, or are over 50 and would like to take part occasionally in some gentle