

Why the path to fitness can also lead us into temptation

Calorie control is like herding cats, but we must try harder, says

DICK LUMSDEN

In the two hours it has taken me to research and write this article, mainly sitting in front of my computer with the occasional visit to the loo or stopping to answer the odd telephone call, I have apparently burned up around 200 calories.

Sounds great doesn't it? Who needs to run marathons when you can burn off calories just pushing buttons on a keyboard with two fingers?

But if it is that easy, and given that these same fingers are pushing pretty hard on keys all day every day, how come I don't have the body of an athlete?

The answer, of course, is that like virtually everyone else in this country, no matter how many calories I burn off during the day, I eat and drink more.

Few people understand calories. They are a bit like percentages. You can make them sound good or bad depending on what point you want to make.

And there are so many variables in how fast you burn them off, depending on what you are doing and how you are doing it.

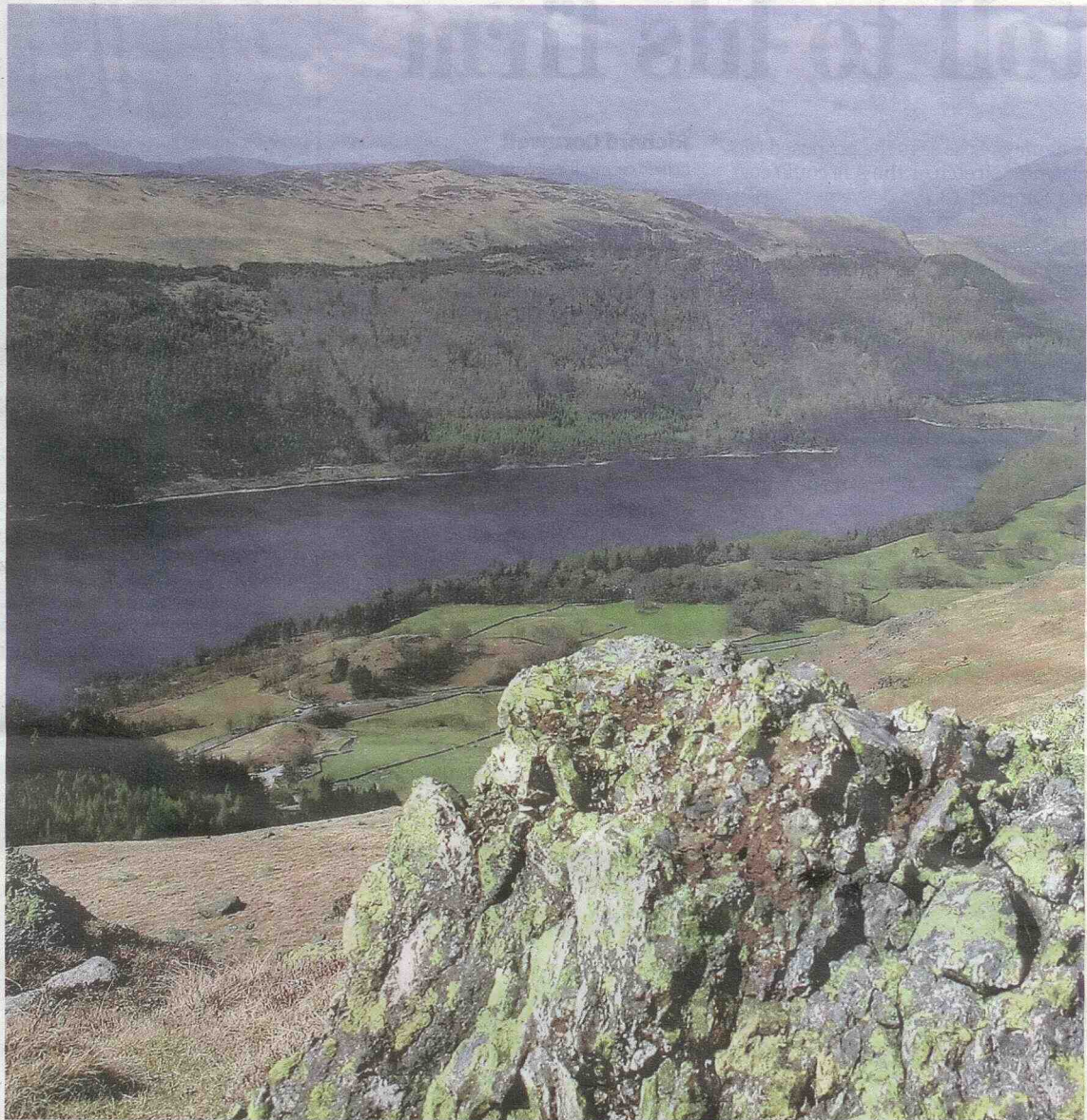
But the inescapable truth is, that if you want to lose weight, you have to use up more calories than you take on board each day. Exercise more or eat less... simples!

If you think of your body as a working machine (mine works better than some but nowhere near as good as others) then the machine is using up energy 24 hours a day as it performs all of the tasks needed to keep you alive. Like breathing, or pumping blood through miles of internal tubing to keep your toes warm.

For my weight and height, and given the type of work I do, apparently my machine uses up around 2,800 calories a day just ticking over. So, as long as I eat less than 2,800 calories a day I'll be fine. If I want a Mars bar I just have to push the keys a bit harder.

But being "over-caloried" is a national problem now. The Government estimates that 61% of adults in the UK are overweight or obese, and it costs the taxpayer £5 billion every year in treating directly related health problems.

The influential medical Journal The Lancet, in a study across every European country, found that Britain was in the bottom



■ We might be tempted by hostleries in the Lake District on our annual walking break but at least we're also getting some exercise - unlike many younger people it seems. Photo: ARCHANT FILES

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The Department of Health and a whole bunch of charities have launched initiative after initiative to try to turn things around.

But are they a bit like King Canute trying to turn back the tide?

Last week Mrs Lumsden and I and four friends went on our now annual pilgrimage to the Lake District. The youngest of our group

all the younger age groups?

I may be generalising, but it seems to me that with a few notable exceptions, we are becoming a nation of sloths.

Youngsters are turning their back on competitive sport at an alarming rate, and young to middle-aged adults mainly want to ride in cars everywhere.

Our Lake District group may never run a marathon, but I was encouraged to read in a new study coming out of America, that a brisk walk is now scientifically proven to be as good for your health as running - you just have to do it for longer.

The study of 48,000 adults found that regular brisk walking had the same benefits as running on reducing blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes and possibly heart disease.

The definition of brisk is a bit vague though. Some people take it as a speedwalk, others that you

opportunity every day to walk for 15 to 30 minutes. Whether it is doing the school run on foot, or walking for a train, or just taking time out some time during the day to walk round the block.

But, as the great Dr Samuel Johnson once said (allegedly) "The road to Hell is paved with good intentions". We may get more people started on the exercising path, but many will fall by the wayside.

Even our walks in the Lakes, literally up hill and down dale, led us into temptation with the promise of refreshment in a local hostelry at the end.

Calories out, calories in. But at least we're trying.

■ 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