

"DOCTOR AT SEA" a monthly Column in The Islander Magazine

Exercise

As I write this piece we are coming to the end of the Wimbledon tennis tournament, equivalent to the British Tennis Open Championship. The weather has been surprisingly hot and sunny and altogether not conducive to vigorous exercise. We all know how much harder it is to move fast in Mallorca at this time of year so it is no surprise to see hear of the struggles felt by top flight tennis players who are pulling out every stop to win.

The human body is remarkable for getting stronger and more efficient the more we ask of it. Machines generally need extra maintenance and repair when subjected to extra demand but, within sensible limits, the body thrives on exercise - muscles get stronger, the circulation is more healthy, we get a lift in mood which can become almost addictive.

The heart muscle strength improves along with increased strength in other groups of muscles and this means that each heart contraction pumps out an increased volume of blood. Cardiac output is a combination of both the pulse rate and also the power of each contraction so a very fit individual will need fewer contractions to achieve the same output as a less fit individual - hence the low resting pulse rate found in individuals who train regularly. At the same time these well trained individuals can still produce an increased pulse rate with exercise but their cardiac output overall is much higher so the oxygen carrying potential of the blood is also much higher and their athletic performance is correspondingly better than that of an unfit person - hence the reason for regular training in competitive sport.

Most of us are not competitive athletes even in a healthy industry such as yachting and, whilst some are superbly fit, others struggle to free up the time to exercise regularly. Experts say walking for half an hour, five days a week, is the minimum required to achieve health benefits but a study from Northern Ireland in 2007 found walking on just three days a week gave similar benefits.

The participants (sedentary civil servants aged between 40 and 61) took part in a 12-week exercise programme - some were assigned to do 30 minutes of brisk walking five days a week, others did it three days a week, and the rest did not change their lifestyles.

There were no changes in the non-walking group, but in both walking groups there was a significant drop in blood pressure and waist and hip measurements. These changes could reduce the risk of heart attack or stroke and all walkers also had improved overall fitness.

Three days a week for half an hour of vigorous exercise may seem more achievable for people under time pressure and the benefits could be immense. There are simple ways of introducing exercise to ordinary life such as walking or cycling wherever possible, avoiding elevators and taking the stairs two at a time, getting off the bus a stop early, making an effort in time off to appreciate this beautiful island's mountains or, at this time of year, enjoy a regular swim. We have moved within walking distance of work and this is a great help although less attractive as the summer heats up but we can all think of different ways to stop our bodies going to sleep and the thirty minutes can be accumulated over the entire day as well as be increased at will.

Regular exercise and a sensible diet will lead to significant weight correction and this in itself will make the exercise all that much easier when there is less bulk to carry around. There is everything to play for and it doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg at a Health Club nor do we need to aspire to Wimbledon fitness to make a major improvement to our quality of life and life expectancy.

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