



Home

**LIVE UPDATES**

- News
- Sport
- RSS Feeds

**MAIN SECTIONS**

- News
- Sport
- Business
- Politics
- **Features**
- Going Out
- Herald Magazine
- Our Awards
- Herald Forum
- Property Awards

**ELECTION 2007**

Election Archive

**VIDEO REPORTS**

- Airport Attack
- Poetry Contest
- Film Trailers
- Paulo Coelho
- Glasgow 2014
- Edwin Morgan
- Aye Write
- Music Festival
- Fashion Week
- Irish Dance
- Video Archive

**PICTURE GALLERY**

- Politician awards
- Mitchell Library
- Opening
- Student Showcase
- A day in the life

**SERVICES**

- Order Your Paper
- Search This Site
- Free Daily Email
- News to your PDA
- Back Issues
- News Archive
- Photo Sales
- Contact us
- Help & FAQs
- Digital Edition

**FAVOURITES**

- Crosswords
- The Diary
- Letters
- Local News
- Local Dating
- Local Weather
- Week In Photos
- Today's page 1
- 225 Years of News

**ADVERTISING**

- Book ads online
- View ads online
- Classifieds
- Family notices
- Homes
- Appointments
- Courses
- Motors Online
- Business online
- Advert guide

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- Evening Times
- Sunday Herald
- Newsquest UK
- Travel Shop

**MAIN FEATURES - IN THIS SECTION**

## Working out a way to stay young

[GORDON CAIRNS](#)

**INDEX**

July 09 2007

Retirement is a time to sit back and relax, right? Wrong: a new generation of older people is turning received wisdom on its head and taking up new methods of keeping fit. At a time of life when our grandparents were buttoning their cardigans and sinking comfortably into their armchairs, the born-again "oldies" are pulling on Lycra and trainers to go windsurfing, cycling and running.

Despite the upsurge in recently retired people engaging in fitness activities, there is still a lot to be done to improve the general health of older people.

David Manion, chief executive of Age Concern Scotland, says: "Among the over-50s, only 17% of women and 25% of men are sufficiently active to benefit their health. Research from the late 1990s suggests that 25% of women and 7% of men aged 70 to 74 have insufficient strength in their legs to get out of a chair without using their arms."

Manion says that for the older generation brought up in more austere times, a lack of facilities created a lifelong interest in exercise and health: "Today's older people's experience of sport was the traditional gym at school. But now, many newly retired people are taking up a range of sports that they've never tried before, from tai'chi to curling. It's more than just starting to go the gym."



OLD HAND: Personal trainer David Calder, pictured in the Pentland hills. Pictures: Gordon Terris

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Dr William Primose, chairman of the Scottish Branch of the British Geriatrics Society, believes age alone should not be a barrier for anyone who wishes to start an exercise programme, adding that older, unfit people have the potential to become fitter. Even some elderly people in care homes should be able to start a gentle exercise programme for the first time.

He says: "For older people who are unfit, but have no medical conditions which would prevent them from exercising, there are plenty of opportunities for improving their functional performance, strength and endurance, and this will lead to

generalised benefits in terms of wellbeing.

"It's likely that by being fitter you will be less prone to a variety of conditions that could become health hazards to older people. You could reduce the risk of heart disease and other circulatory disorders, as well as other conditions such as diabetes.

"A more active older population is going to demonstrate a greater degree of positive health, while retaining independence."

Edinburgh-based personal trainer David Calder has 10 years' experience of helping people of all ages to improve their health. He has found that there are unforeseen barriers to older people joining a gym that are not there for younger people, who have been saturated with health and fitness education through the mass media.

Calder, who previously managed the health club for Claridge's hotel in Mayfair, London, says: "A lot of members who use health clubs during the day are older people. I think if you are older and new to it, you might feel intimidated arriving at a health club, with all of the fancy machines and lots of young people sprinting away on the treadmill."

Calder, who has trained a number of Hollywood celebrities including Harvey Keitel, Madeleine Stowe and film director Joel Schumacher, feels this intimidation could turn older people off getting fit, but if they persevere, the results will be worthwhile.

"When somebody is on the journey to being fitter, they go through changes. They get a bit slimmer, their body tightens up. Your motivation and self-esteem improve and you give yourself a kick back into life again."

However, Calder warns against jumping in without taking precautions. "It's important to make sure you are not going to do yourself any harm, and if you have any medical

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concerns, you should speak to your GP.

He adds: "Older people should be doing low-impact exercises. You should be working on mobility, posture and flexibility and, if cardio-vascular, gentle exercise such as going for a wee jog or a cycle."

After a lifetime without taking exercise, retired builder Bill Jarrett believes he is healthier now than he was as a young man, after less than two years of training. He says: "My blood pressure is very good now, probably better than when I was a stressed-out young man.

"I probably have better health now than I had in my forties, and my back is better than it was in my twenties, although I am not doing heavy work now."

Bill and his wife hired Calder as their personal trainer after Bill retired two years ago, and when he discovered his daughter was going to take part in a 10km race, he decided to run with her. Bill, from Colinton, Edinburgh, says: "In the run-up to retiring, we decided we didn't want to vegetate, so we joined a gym. Once I had decided to have a go at the 10k I asked David to change the fitness programme he had already given me."

Bill ran the race in a very respectable 55 minutes, after training for only four months, although he adds that he didn't manage to beat his daughter.

The couple have also recently walked from coast to coast along Hadrian's Wall, covering 136 miles in 10 days. He says: "The last section was absolutely horrendous, with horizontal rain for hours and hours, but both my wife and I just put our heads down and carried on going."

He has experienced a lot of benefits from his new lifestyle: "This may seem like a strange thing to say, but I generally feel much more alert.

"I think we get more out of life - we don't sit about - and we always seem to be doing something. I've heard retired people say they are busier than ever, and it's true for us, too. We are busier doing the things that we really enjoy doing.

"Besides, my joints are much freer and I can bend and stretch more easily," he adds.

In 1995, Bill had to give up job as a company director due to stress brought on by working too much. He adds: "Believe me, I wasn't running anywhere then - I wasn't in any state to do anything like that."

Manion believes one reason the new generation of older people is more adventurous than its predecessors is the approach to life: "I think it is about the mindset of the person. When you leave work, you don't leave life. Retirement is an opportunity to start new things which can impact on the rest of your life."

Personal trainer Shirley Thomson, who is based in Perth and specialises in working with the over-50s, says there is a wide range of activities to suit older exercisers, but the most important element is to do something that motivates you.

"The types of exercise range from group exercise classes such as dance, aqua aerobics and boxing - which for the older adults is a great stress-buster - to gym programmes and competitive sports such as bowling, golf or badminton.

"The important thing is just to get started with whatever entices you to get moving, then just do it."

- [www.davidcalder.com](http://www.davidcalder.com)

### **Fit and feeling it: get going with David Calder's four-week plan**

When embarking on a healthier and more active lifestyle, adopt long-term goals. Introduce new healthy habits progressively and realistically, as breaking ingrained habits will take time. Plan carefully on paper and mark progress in a diary. Bring each week's new habits with you into the next.

**Week 1:** Cut down on tea, coffee and alcohol. Drink six glasses of water throughout the day and introduce more fruit and vegetables to your diet. Take a daily 20 minute brisk walk.





**Week 2:** Arrange to attend an exercise class or activity with a friend, or for a personal trainer or sporty relative to give you a programme to follow, which should include cardiovascular training (a little jog or cycle), strength, posture, agility and balance work - and, of course, relaxation.

**Week 3:** Plan healthy but tasty meals, read food labels carefully and ditch the comfort food. Have healthy snacks at hand for between meals and eat carbohydrates at lunch time, to provide energy for the rest of the day.

**Week 4:** You are now starting to feel changes happen. Your self-esteem, happiness and energy levels have increased, your body is beginning to tighten up and your youthful spring is slowly returning. Many people weaken at this stage and old habits start to creep back in, but be strong and focus on the positive changes and how these have affected you, your friends and your family.

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