

The Soft Life Is Bad Medicine

If your legs never take you farther than your garage, you are courting ill health, says this leading exponent of outdoor exercise

By PAUL DUDLEY WHITE, M.D. as told to Curtis Mitchell

PRESIDENT KENNEDY, in speaking of physical fitness, recently said that we have become a nation of onlookers instead of doers.

On the other hand, people who should know better have said that exercise is unimportant.

It is important. It is important for us to be more than mere spectators of sports. We can profit by enlarging our activities beyond those of getting into and out of automobiles, buses, trains, planes, and our easy chairs. We should all start using our legs again.

As long as I can remember, I have sought activity outdoors and have always been refreshed thereby. One of my first ambitions was to be a forester, and many of my early summers were spent at Camp Becket in western Massachusetts. One summer, I walked all the way from Becket across the state of Connecticut to get a look at Long Island Sound.

While still in college, I changed my personal goal from forestry to medicine, but I have continued to hike and to urge others to do so.

Fortunately, the means for such exercise, for living a more active life, are coming into use again. They are the bicycle path, the back road, the mountain trail, and the great parks in every section of the country.

Adequate statistics relating health to exercise are lacking, but certain advantages of exercise are well-known to physicians. Many of us consider exercise just as essential as sleep and food.

First, exercise has an immediate effect on the circulation. Good muscle tone in the arms and legs maintains better circulation of blood through the veins. Our veins are provided with one-way valves, and their compression by the skeletal muscles helps pump the blood back to the heart. Hard muscles do this job better than soft ones.

Exercise also improves the muscle tone of the diaphragm—the muscle that brings oxygen to the lungs, removes carbon dioxide, and sucks blood into the heart. Vigorous exercise aids these processes. But if that is impossible, deep breathing several times a day is of some value.

There are other benefits from exercise, too. Digestion and bowel function are improved. A brisk walk before bedtime may help induce sleep better than any kind of medicine, a highball, or a tv show. Most important, adequate muscular exercise is an antidote for mental fatigue. In my

own case, nervous stress and strain can be counteracted, even prevented, by regular exercise.

Sometimes, a walk can be the difference between well-being and illness. Several years ago, an aged patient of mine was forced to sit about the house through much of the winter because of grippe. By spring, his legs had begun to swell and he was fearful of almost any movement. He had no heart disease or leg-vein thrombosis, so I had him resume his former habit of walking a mile or two each day. His swelling disappeared, and he has suffered no more trouble with his legs.

If walking is good, so is cycling. As a freshman in college, I rode my bicycle about 10 miles a day and thought nothing of it. My father sometimes rode his bicycle 100 miles a day when he was a young man!

While attending medical meetings abroad, my wife and I have often found cycling an ideal way to get acquainted with the people of an unfamiliar country. On travels in Holland and Ireland, we easily cycled 25 miles a day.

HERE AT HOME, Americans own more than 27 million bicycles, but we suffer from a shortage of safe roads and paths.

Fortunately, the public is at last becoming interested in the problem. Recently, I visited Homestead, Fla., "the City of Bicycles," where I joined people of all ages in enjoying this healthful mode of transportation.

In Massachusetts, we have formed the committee for Safe Bicycling, Inc., which supported legislation that resulted in building a safe bicycle path on the island of Nantucket.

Our group's current efforts include encouraging the residents of communities across the nation to develop safe bicycle paths from homes to schools, to shopping areas, and to railway and bus stations.

All healthy persons, no matter what their age, should exercise. Man needs an efficient circulation with adequate reserve, not merely a sluggish one. An emergency such as an acute illness or accident can suddenly call on the full resources of the body. Being in a state of positive health rather than merely existing may mean the difference between life and death.

The outdoors awaits. It is time for Americans to pause and consider how they can take advantage of its health-giving pleasures.



Dr. White takes his own good advice—though 75, he rides a bicycle regularly to keep his body active.

COVER:

This lively couple, photographed by Glen Fishback, sets the theme for this special issue devoted to the great outdoors: vacation, travel, recreation, and plain fun.

**Family
Weekly**

May 20, 1962

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Address all communications about editorial features to
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