

A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a red ribbed tank top and black leggings with red side stripes, is captured in a running pose. She is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a lush green park with trees and a grassy field, slightly out of focus. The text 'the RIGHT STEP' is overlaid on the right side of the image.

the RIGHT STEP

Find it hard to start a fitness regime? According to the experts, getting in shape is as simple as putting one foot in front of the other. As Yi-Hwa Hanna discovers, it's all about getting back to basics...

From Piloxing (that's Pilates and boxing, in case you didn't know) to Caponyasa (a combo of Brazilian martial art Capoeira and Indian Vinyasa yoga, obviously), it seems everywhere we turn there's a new fitness craze that promises to be the answer to everything.

But rather than sign up for another six-week session of Bokwa (that would be traditional African Kwaito dance moves mixed with a bit of boxing, to you and me), researchers at Harvard University are telling us that the key to staying fit and healthy and getting into shape is as simple as putting one foot in front of the other and getting back to basics by doing what your body was built to do: walking, hiking, running or climbing.

According to the UK's Walking for Health initiative, you won't find a better way to lose weight than simply walking or running. With visible long-lasting results in terms of weight loss and muscular fitness, according to researchers, "walking at a moderate pace for just three hours a week can lower the risk of heart disease in women up to 40 per cent."

"Walking for 3 hours a week can lower risk of heart disease by up to 40 per cent"

While a simple stroll seems so easy to incorporate into our busy daily lives, studies reveal that our cardiovascular system is the first to benefit from walking, running and climbing: "The body is the most effective machine ever constructed and adapts with every new exercise it's challenged with," says Nadine du Toit, Personal Trainer and Owner of GloryGirl Fitness (www.glorygirlfitness.com). "By incorporating walking or running into daily life, the effects on your cardiovascular health would mean improved circulation, a tougher immune system, stronger bones and better breathing, not to mention the physical benefits of toning up and weight loss."

Hiking and climbing are also effective in overall fitness. According to Livestrong.com, a partner of the Lance Armstrong Foundation, it will increase your endurance, strength and flexibility and in the long term, can even lessen your chances of a heart attack, high blood pressure, cancer or stroke. Meanwhile, the Mental Health and Physical Activity Journal in the USA claims a minimum of 150 minutes of

JULIE LEWIS, 49

"I've always been fascinated by the human body and what it's capable of," reveals 49-year-old Julie Lewis who will be hiking through the Norwegian Arctic circle next month with an all-female team from the UAE.

The first to know how putting your best foot forward can make a huge impact on your mind and body—"the impact these treks have made on my life is immeasurable"—Julie has been inspiring women to join her in these physical challenges since she led her first trip to Kota Kinabalu Mountain in Borneo in April 2002. While most other women would have been dressing up for a dinner party, for Julie her 40th birthday celebrations involved hiking through jungle and scaling a mountain in what turned out to be a transformational journey in so many ways: "The natural high and feeling of elation I experienced at the top of the summit was such a 'light bulb' moment for me—I just knew that I wanted to do this more often and to share it with as many women as possible. Each time I climb, the confidence that I get from reaching the summit spills over into my everyday life and stands me in good stead for whatever challenges life in the city may send my way."

While most of us may feel that scaling a mountain or trekking the Arctic is beyond them, Julie—who leads the expeditions to support charitable causes—admits that while training can be hard and takes

physical activity a week can improve your sleep quality by 65 per cent—a benefit that can't be ignored when, according to a survey by Zarca Interactive, 68 per cent of UAE residents aren't sleeping properly at night.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL

If the physical benefits aren't enough to put a smile on your face, researchers from the University of Bonn found that the runner's high will not only make you happier but can actually decrease feelings of pain thanks to the endorphins released in your brain after exercise. "No one can deny the serotonin

"I have always been fascinated by what the human body is physically capable of"

physical commitment, it's more about overcoming the mind. "It's all about taking the first step. I like to encourage visualisation (for whatever sized challenge you're undertaking) as it's a very powerful tool to program the mind and body. A positive attitude is also key... all of the women on our team share these traits and have a positive 'Can do, will do, love to do' attitude."

When it comes to Julie's advice on getting back to basics, it is simple: "Keep the big picture in mind, then get to work on the finer details with passion."

To learn more about Mountain High, visit www.mountainhighme.com



high you get after a vigorous walk or run outside," says du Toit.

A study published in Health Psychology also found that a simple 10 minute walk can act as a stress-buster in daily life, while research from the Appalachian State University has shown that those who walk for 40 minutes per day have half as many sick days as those who don't.

GET OUTDOORS

For added benefits, taking these exercises outdoors (especially at the moment when the weather is fantastic) has even more →



ROSA AREOSA, 46

Born in South Africa, mum-of-three Rosa Areosa moved to Dubai with her family three years ago. After selling her business and becoming a housewife again, Rosa had time to focus on her love for walking. A year later, she heard about the Maria Cristina Foundation, a charity which helps less fortunate individuals overcome poverty, and she came up with an idea to combine her passion for walking with her desire to give something back to society: the 777 Challenge.

"My dream had been to walk across the seven Emirates of the UAE, and the 777 Challenge was born from that idea. I would walk seven marathons across seven Emirates in seven days, and in doing so would raise money for and awareness of the charity," she says, proudly having gotten the Challenge off the ground.

Her gruelling walk concluded on the UAE's 40th National Day. Within a total of 42 hours, seven minutes and 46 seconds, Rosa had walked a distance of 294km.

"Power walking is a real passion of mine, and I now have more time to focus on it as I have a lot of time to myself," she says. "Getting results is about pushing yourself out of your comfort zone—only then will you start seeing what your limits are," says Rosa, adding, "When I walk it exemplifies exactly that—one step at a time."

To learn more about the Maria Cristina Foundation, visit www.mariacristinafoundation.org



positive impact on our general health. Results from the Vorarlberg Institute for Vascular Investigation and Treatment prove that hiking outdoors not only gives you a chance for some fresh air (and a vital injection of vitamin D), it can also reduce bad cholesterol and blood sugar levels, and improve your glucose tolerance.

"However, the best benefit to getting back to basics is that it's absolutely free to walk or run outdoors," says du Toit. "The UAE has some great areas to explore and hike in too". And with many fitness studios in the UAE charging around Dhs80 a class, you could spend almost Dhs1000 a month before you've even started.

However, du Toit does recommend investing in a good pair of running shoes. "The biggest physical challenge for most people is to put their running shoes on, so make sure you've got a good pair!" she says. "Minor lower back and knee pain can be avoided by wearing the right shoe, so a good place to start is a specialised sports shop or if you want to get serious about it, the Physio Centre (www.physiocentre.ae) will

perform a gait analysis and record you walking or running on a treadmill to check lower limb and foot function."

"Being active on a daily basis is the key," says du Toit. "Long-term fitness is attained by setting a goal for yourself, creating a plan of how you are going to reach that goal, and making a consistent daily effort of moving closer to it," she says, adding, "It's always going to be easier to start the fitness journey by getting the basics right first and then progressing from there. So doing functional exercises—meaning exercises that focus on actions you do in everyday life using your own body weight like running or walking—will always be the go-to when we start a fitness regime."

ANYONE CAN DO IT

"If you can walk around a shopping mall or to the cinema, you can put your trainers on and burn some calories by incorporating an after-dinner stroll into your day," says du Toit, who says that any healthy person can get back to basics and start with a walking, running or functional training exercise

5 DUBAI'S BEST RUNNING SPOTS

Whether you're strolling, power-walking or running, there are more places to get active than you'd think

1 Safa Park A favourite among Dubai residents, the park has a 3.4km track along the perimeter and lush gardens inside. *Open from 8am-11pm daily.*

2 Jumeirah Beach The specially built 2.5km beach running track has incredible ocean views. *Open from 8am-10:30pm daily, and until 11pm on Thursdays & Fridays.*

3 Mushrif Park This green Mirdif park boasts a great running track as well as children's activities and pony rides to keep them entertained while you

train. *Open from 8:30am-10:30pm Saturdays to Wednesdays, and 8:30am-11pm on Thursdays & Fridays.*

4 Al Barsha Pond Park With 162 hectares of floral greens and lakes, this park boasts a 2.5km track, basketball and volleyball courts. *Open from 8am-11pm daily.*

5 Creekside Park One of the most beautiful in Dubai with BBQs, fishing piers, a mini-golf course and excellent running tracks throughout its 96 hectares. *Open daily from 8am-11pm.*



programme. "Our bodies were made to move and to be active. But to do things safely, just be aware that running has a high and continuous impact on the lower body joints including the ankles, knees and hips. That's why the key in starting any new exercise plan is to start slow and steady to make sure you do it safely." Her advice for getting started is to focus on a walking and cycling program to improve cardiovascular health until you're conditioned enough to start with running. "It's also vital to tune into your breathing rhythm; deep breathing through the nostrils and out of the mouth is the best technique. As your level of fitness increases, so will the ease of breathing even when your training gets tougher."

You don't need to be a fitness fanatic to be take the first step—anyone can do these exercises as long as you put your mind to it. "If there are no physical limitations like injuries or severe sickness, then the only possible limitation before taking on something like this might be in your mind," says du Toit. "Our bodies were engineered to move, dance, walk, run, jump and play, but if you haven't been active for a long time, it might feel uncomfortable to start with. Keep going as with consistent effort, putting on your trainers will become something to look forward to every day and you'll be running marathons before you know it." ■

JANE WILSON, 39

"I'm the first person to say I could never run a half-marathon, but here I am, about to turn 40 and I'm doing it this month!" says Jane Wilson, a self-confessed exercise convert who is determined to cross the finish line at the Ras Al Khaimah Half-Marathon.

"I used to think it was easier to sit on the sofa than go out training; that was before I realised how great running can make you feel," says the mum-of-three. Jane entered a 10k run last year after following a training plan for eight weeks, and was hooked. "Runners high is a reality and not a myth! The half marathon seemed like the next logical step," she says.

Rewarding as it may be, it's not always easy but where many would feel their willpower start to waver, Jane simply focuses on her end goal.

"Sometimes it's hard to actually get out of the door but I've never once regretted going out for a run. I'm still a beginner but lots of people give up because they start too hard and too fast, not giving themselves the chance to start enjoying it and feeling the benefits. The only way to run well is to put the training in," she says.

"I've never once regretted going out for a run... it's the perfect excuse for 'me-time'"

"I train four times per week, which is manageable because my husband is very supportive," she explains, adding, "Running is the perfect excuse for 'me time'. My shape has also changed in that I'm leaner yet stronger," Jane says. She's also emotionally stronger now thanks to her training. "The beauty of running is that you're only really competing against yourself. I've never felt more empowered and I'd like to think that



"I'll carry on running as long as my legs will let me," she says with a smile.

To learn more about the Ras Al Khaimah Half Marathon, visit www.rakmarathon.org