

Trying to remain fit!

I was 76 in May 2021. Some sort of physical activity daily has been a source of enjoyment for me as long as I can remember. When I have been too busy with work and travelling, I use time in between work for getting out. In Lesotho, when on consultancy visits, I always take steps in the morning to my office on the 11th floor. On reaching, I can feel my heart pounding, which should be enough for the day for one's heart health! During lunch break, I make it a point to walk a short distance to have a bite and fresh air. When I was working in Delhi, I had to travel using a Metro from my residence to reach office. I recall using only steps and never an escalator, to get in or out of the station. In addition, walking from home to station and station to office, further added to my simple exercising without having to find separate time for it. Office/sedentary workers often complain that they do not have time to exercise, and that is not good for health, especially as we grow older. A recent mention of why we escape the wards for a walk by busy doctors is worth quoting, "Barnet is a beautiful area with lots of greenery. The hospital is surrounded by its own car park and has a couple of green areas in the grounds, so we just walked around the site for about 15 minutes and it made us all feel a lot better."[\[1\]](#)

Current Covid-19 epidemic has further reiterated that lack of exercise and carrying extra weight is a critical predisposing factor for the disease. In addition, chronic heart diseases, hypertension, diabetes, are all related to lack of physical activity and unhealthy eating. I posted an article on this website sometime back how one can find time to do some level of exercise even with a busy schedule of work. (*see under Home > Old Items 2018 > Office Worker's Dilemma 18th August*)

These days I go for cycling early in the mornings. The fresh and cool breeze is pleasing. I used to go for brisk walks (100-120 steps/minute), anything from 5-7Kms and started experiencing pain in my knees, which worried me with the thought that my walking days were coming to an end. Fortunately, on a friend's advice from his personal experience, I started to cycle instead of walking. There was no pain on cycling but since my leg muscles were not used to this type of exercise, thighs were sore for days. However, I was enjoying the whole new experience. I kept on cycling and within days my legs felt better and even stronger. This has gone on since December 2019 with one or two days a month of skipping the exercise, and to date I have cycled over 8500 Kms. cumulatively. Using Samsung Health App on my mobile has been useful in many ways. I had set my daily target to 10k, which became too easy, as I was doing much more than that without much effort, so I raised the target to 15K. I have gone past 20K daily for many months and do not bother much about this target. The other marker is the speed of cycling and I feel better now with at least 20K per hour. I am writing about the use of this App with a purpose, that any measure of your exercising helps to push yourself a bit harder and hence being fitter. I also spend 10-15 minutes on exercising machines in our village, mainly to exercise upper parts of my body. More than anything, I feel good in myself and healthier. My muscles are stronger than what I started with and the knee pain has disappeared altogether. I do not recall any illness, even a common cold, for all this time. Of course, we have behaved sensibly during this epidemic to protect ourselves from any unnecessary exposure to crowds. The point I would like to make is that it is important to appreciate that one doesn't need extra resources to indulge in meaningful physical activity, only mental attitude is required.

An hour or so spent on any physical activity is a valuable time for both, mind and body. Whilst walking or cycling around Chiang Mai, the enjoyment of the cool breeze, beautiful views of the mountains, watching interesting cloud formation culminating into beautiful sunsets are a delight. The green rice fields are so refreshing to the eyes along with the bright colours of the seasonal blooms in the trees, rekindling my interest in botany since childhood. I smile to myself as I remember some aspects of flowers and leaves that remind me of some beautiful care free times of my childhood.

I must mention the aromas, as I walk or cycle past homes. Cooking aromas, "*Khao Holm*" steaming rice smell, frying garlic with spices, roadside barbeques, all fill you with pleasurable thoughts of enjoyable times. Oct-Nov, when rice grain starts forming, even the air around the rice paddies carry mild rice aroma. Early morning passing a blooming Frangipani tree fills you with a delightful fragrance.

The pleasure of bird watching is part of my outings. I was freer to watch birds when I was walking but cycling has opened up even wider expanses where I can stop and watch the birds. Especially a couple of old quarry lakes, where hundreds of Lesser Whistling Ducks reside most of the year. During ploughing of flooded rice paddies, hundreds of Egrets, White-vented Mynas and Asian Openbill Storks are seen gulping worms and snails. Olive-backed Sunbirds, Scaly-breasted Munias, Red-wattle Lapwings, White-breasted Waterhen, Bulbuls, Doves, Black Drongos, even Racket-tailed Drongos, Oriental Magpie-robins, Greater Coucals, Bee-eaters are the common birds seen during the outings. Barbets, Coucals and Asian Koels are more often heard than seen.

Time spent outdoors is priceless for my mental health as well. It is my time to think and absorb what I see and feel. It is a time to plan what I need to do in future and to reflect on past. I often plan the development and sustenance of my website as new ideas flow through my mind. Being mentally and physically occupied is an essential aspect of retired life and one must have some hobbies to keep oneself occupied. Cooking, reading, bird watching, photography, my website, are some of the things that keep me occupied, as reflected in this website under other interests. You are most welcomed to visit.

To sum up, healthy diet and regular physical activity are the foundation of good health. It helps if this has been your lifestyle from younger days, however, it is never too late to start. Making a hobby of these two things is important as forced dieting and exercising is certainly not effective, because the state of mind is fundamental to good health. Cooking is particularly of interest to me and is my hobby. Firstly, I love cooking and enjoying my own cooking. Secondly, it helps me to eat only those things which I feel are healthy, avoiding processed foods and using as much as possible naturally grown items. Making my own bread, experimenting cooking lentils, vegetables and recipes from YouTube are some of the pleasures of life.

There are lessons to be learnt all around us. A coastal community near Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea is a good example, along with other pacific islanders. Naturally available food like taro, other roots and vegetables and fish was their staple diet before close proximity to Port

Moresby city introduced white bread and the whole community switched to using white flour and other cheap junk foods. Now most of the adults are markedly obese, have diabetes and other chronic diseases.^{[2][3]} Vegetarians in India are not exempt from processed food and sugary drinks. Indians have a high incidence of diabetes and heart disease; and relevantly recent dietary changes to processed food (processed sugars, oils and other fats, flour etc) are likely contributors, in addition to genetic predisposition to diabetes among Indians.^[4]

References

- [1] Francesca Robinson. Why we . . . escape the wards for a walk. BMJ 2021;374:n1653
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- [4] Mohan V. Why are Indians more prone to diabetes? J Assoc Physicians India. 2004 Jun; 52:468-74. PMID: 15645957.

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