

Fit yourself up, just for fun

By Ruth Ostrow

I AM standing staring at a long, blue mat that goes on forever, watching people in my fitness class do cartwheels down the runway. Now it's my turn. My hands are sweating. I feel like I can hardly breathe. The last time I did one of these was as a child.

"Couch potatoes are made, not born," Steven Blair, an epidemiologist from the US's Cooper Institute, said recently on the ABC. His words ring in my ears as I confront my fear and prepare to move my body in ways that will defy gravity.

Not that I'm really a couch potato. I'm one of the newer breeds: the ugly, hybrid monster-child -- the computer nerd. Like so many of my peers, I sit hunched over a screen all day, typing, researching on the internet.

Modern technology has taken away the need to move. We don't even have to walk into libraries any more or move our arms to get newspaper clippings down from shelves. Due to electric toothbrushes we don't need to clean our teeth with any effort. And I don't want to comment on what the vibrator has meant to modern homo sapiens' muscle tone.

Blair was saying that scientists have coined a term to describe what happens to people like me, professionals whose greatest asset is weight-bearing bum cheeks, as well as school children who are hooked on their Nintendos, computer or TV screens.

It's called Sedentary Death Syndrome and though the expression might put a smile on someone's face -- if they still have movement in their facial muscles -- it is actually one of the biggest killers in the Western world. The term SeDS is being used to cover more than 30 potentially fatal disorders -- including coronary heart disease, stroke, diabetes and cancer -- that come from inactivity.

A recent survey I read stated 88 per cent of Australians now believe their health could be improved by being more active. I am one of them. So what to do?

"Have fun!" according to entrepreneur and philanthropist Malcolm Freake. Freake is the mastermind behind the Bluearth Institute. Bluearth was founded in 1999 as a non-profit organisation to develop the mind, body and spirit of Australians through sport and physical activity. Basically, it's the Anti-SeDS Show going on the road to preach good health to the needy.

The organisation came to public prominence recently through the Discovery School Experience -- a program it has been running in country primary schools for the past two years, dedicated to encouraging children to have fun physical experiences.

"It's not sport but physical activity that we're trying to get children involved in. We want them to have a great time," Freake says, adding that this could include anything from playing ball games to throwing around a frisbee and climbing trees. "And we want to see adults doing the same."

Freake is part of a burgeoning trend to wellness that is sweeping the Western world. "The future is about prevention rather than cure," he says. "And more and more people are starting to realise it."

He says that it's more fun to do more activity, rather than eat less food. And he suggests people find enjoyable ways to get their health fix each week.

Some of the latest fun fitness trends I've been researching include urban Boot Camps which are starting up in several cities. I recently met a couple who were getting up at six each morning to train in the centre of Melbourne with an army lieutenant who had them meandering through city buildings and doing push-ups on the bitumen before work.

Fitness centres now include a colourful range of enjoyable activities such as mountain climbing on custom-built walls. Meanwhile, I recently did a six-week erotic-dance class. Pole dancing is super for the thighs, not to mention the sex life. And a recent fitness fashion in many cities is circus-style gymnastics where people dangle upside down on a host of contraptions and trapezes, and reap havoc with hula hoops.

My favourite activity is yoga, but my new yoga teacher likes to end the class with a bit of circus fun. Backward rolls, somersaults, handstands, headstands -- I've been trying them all. And today there are the cartwheels. Of course I'm afraid. But I'm far more afraid of stiff joints. So suddenly I'm up and over.

It's not a pretty sight. Something like a donkey kicking backwards and a person falling down stairs. But I'm up again and suddenly I feel my legs go gracefully into the air and over as my body actually remembers this from childhood.

"Beautiful," says the teacher, as I run along to join the back of the queue again, giggling madly like a five-year-old.

As I start to experiment around the traps with ways to keep myself active, I'm discovering some of the many, wonderful and exotic ways I can break every bone in my body. But faced with the reality of atrophy, arthritis or SeDS, I would prefer this. They can write on my tombstone: "At least she died laughing".

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First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 04 OCT 2003