

SPORTS AND PASTIMES, THEIR BENEFITS AND DANGERS.

BY A FAMILY DOCTOR.



Nobody thinks of denying that exercise, in some form or other, is necessary in order to keep the system in a state of health and in good working order. But medical men go farther than this, and state, in axiomatic diction, that *regular* and *sufficient* recreative exercise is the *sine qua non* of a healthful existence. I have purposely italicised my adjectives in the last sentence, in order to draw closer attention to them. Exercise, then, should be *regular*. Why? Because, in plain language, it is a tonic, and not only the best and safest tonic that any man or woman can take, but the only one that can be taken continuously with benefit. It is also far better than all other tonics, because it not only strengthens but regulates the system in every way. But desultory exercise, taken one day and omitted the next, may act as an occasional stimulant, but certainly not as a tonic or roborant. Medicinal roborants require to be used day after day for weeks, or even months, ere the patient obtains full benefit from them. And exercise, to do that amount of good which is desirable, must be unremitting. Exercise should be *sufficient*. Statistically speaking, a recent authority on this important subject gives it as his opinion that the amount of exercise which a healthy man should take without fatigue is, at the very least, that which is required to raise 150 foot-tons a day. This, if the exercise indulged in were walking, would be equivalent to about nine miles per diem along a level road. In quoting this learned opinion I do not wish any reader to infer that it would do him good to walk nine or ten miles a day on a stretch. Again I beg to remind him that exercise is a tonic, and that tonics only do good when taken in small doses frequently repeated. What would you think of a man who—his family physician having ordered him a dozen quinine and iron pills, the box being labelled “One twice a day”—should swallow the whole lot on Monday morning to save time, and keep him whole and strong for the six days to come? But as regards exercise, thousands of people are constantly making the same foolish and ridiculous mistake.

“I have a day off on Tuesday,” says one, “I’ll go in for a regular constitutional.”

And accordingly on the Tuesday he starts, and walks until he is ready to drop, then perhaps takes a stimulant and goes on again.

He feels rather tired and sleepy, not to say stupid, on Wednesday morning; but he sincerely believes, for all that, that his long walk has done him good.

“Well, now,” says another, “Saturday is a half-holiday. I shall mount my cycle, and do my little sixty;

for the weather has been so queer of late that I haven’t been astride for a month.”

The very fact of his not having been astride for a month should warn him not to take violent exercise so recklessly, for from disuse the muscles get flabby and the tendons slack. The tendons, I may remark parenthetically, may be likened to the great leather belts that stretch from one broad wheel to another in the machinery of a mill and transmit the power. What would you think of an engine-driver who would attempt to do a big day’s work with slackened belts?

“My liver wants stirring up a bit,” says gentleman number three; “I have not been on horseback for weeks, but I’ll do a glorious ride ’cross country to-morrow, and come home as fresh as a lark.”

He does not come home as fresh as a lark though, nor anything like it, albeit he has “stirred his liver up.”

Why, it is perfectly ridiculous the way some people talk about their livers, especially city men—I speak advisedly. That poor ill-used organ is used anyhow all the week, and shaken up for all the world as if it were a bundle of hay on Saturday or Sunday. It would be amusing to think of were it not so sad. It puts me in mind of a remark that an Irish woman, Biddy O’Flaherty, made to me the other day.

“You don’t make your bed often enough, Biddy,” I said.

“Troth indade, sorr,” she replied, “I don’t make it moren onct a month, but *I gives a rale shakin’ up then, sorr.*”

While exercise should be regular and sufficient, then, it should never be excessive, never reach the boundary line of positive fatigue, else instead of being tonic it becomes a depressant, and does positive injury to the blood, thus degenerating muscle. It is better also for the health that exercise should be as greatly varied as possible, so that the strain shall not be thrown constantly day after day upon the same groups of muscles.

“I have plenty of exercise during the day,” is a remark often made by those who are advised to make use of this natural tonic for the benefit or regeneration of their health; “my duties keep me nearly all day on my legs.”

“I,” says another, “have a long walk to my work or office every morning and evening.”

“My dear sir,” I should reply to the latter, “I do not wish in the slightest degree to underrate the value of these to-and-fro walks. They, in a measure, do good, but they cannot be classed in the category of healthful exercises, because they are not recreative.”

And this leads me to speak more particularly on the subject of sports and pastimes, and I cannot do so without touching shortly on what is usually called “training”—in other words, the process by which athletes, and amateur athletes, endeavour to bring

their bodies into the form and condition best suited for the performance of certain feats of agility or strength.

I have no wish to discountenance athletic training, but as a medical man I ought to be listened to when I say it is only free from danger to health and life when conducted with moderation, wisdom, and temperance. On the other hand, I do not advise any of my readers to go into training for the sake of scoring good records, but every one between the ages of sixteen and sixty should, by taking daily exercise and by adopting a judicious mode of life, be able at any time to indulge in sport and pastime not only without fatigue, but with positive pleasure.

To do so a man should neither be too fat nor too lean: obesity is far more objectionable than what is called spareness, for fat is apt to encroach upon and usurp the place of healthy muscular tissue, and constitute itself a burden both to body and mind.

Sports and pastimes in this country are happily both numerous and varied in character, and moderate and regular indulgence in them is of incalculable benefit to the health. They constitute a medical man's *beau idéal* of proper exercise because, while engaged in them, not only are muscles exercised, and every organ in the body regenerated by the pure life-giving blood sent in greater quantities through it, but the mind is exhilarated at the same time, care and worry and business are for the time being entirely forgotten, so that the brain is really rested and receives as much benefit by the pleasant respite as it would from hours of healthy sleep.

Now whatever amount of good is capable of being derived from sports and pastimes, the man who is not in tolerably good form is very unlikely to benefit therefrom. Before, therefore, making up his mind to enter upon a course of exercise of this kind, one ought to "train" so far as to bring himself into good, or at least fair condition.

I will briefly state how this may be done safely, but let me explain first the state a man's tissues are in, nine times out of ten, who is not in the habit of taking proper exercise. I do care whether he be fat or lean, feeling healthy and comfortable, or quite the reverse; I say this, that he has no stay in him, and if put to the test this would soon be found to be true. His liver cannot be in good working order, it must be incapable of eliminating the bile from the blood—I wish to steer clear of all physiological considerations for the nonce, and it is no matter to me whether the bile is secreted in the liver wholly or partially—if it be *not* secreted and excreted, the process of digestion is weakened, and the blood poisoned, and this, too, quite independent of the entire work that the kidneys and skin may willingly perform. If the digestion be weakened, the blood, which is composed from the products of the food we eat, will not be pure; and for this reason, as well as from want of continuous action, every muscle in the body will get soft and flabby. The heart itself, being a muscle, partakes of the general slackness, and this accounts for men who are out of condition puffing and blowing on slight exertion.

This state of being "easily blown" is put down by trainers to a want of "stamina" in the lung tissue itself. Well, to be sure, when a man is not in form the lungs partake of the general weakness, but it is nevertheless more the heart than the lungs that is at fault, that organ being unable, when excited, to receive the blood back in sufficient volume from the organs of respiration, which thus get temporarily congested.

Walking is probably the best and safest means of getting into condition, aided of course by temperate living.

Before commencing a course of sports or pastimes, then, whether that be cycling, rowing, or playing ball in any way whatever, let the would-be-healthy reader indulge in two or three weeks' walking exercise. Let no weather prevent him from taking his two good walks a day; let him dress lightly but warmly while doing so, and do his walk steadily, increasing the distance daily as he can bear it. His diet and sleep must be studied during this preliminary training, but he must never walk on a full stomach. He must eat only what he knows agrees with him, and not partake of too much at any one time.

He must endeavour in every way in his power to obtain good sleep at night, but never use narcotics or what are called nightcaps. The last hour or two of the day should always be spent in reading. It is a most pernicious and most slumber-banishing habit, that of talking—probably earnestly or excitedly—till it is time to light the bed-room candle and retire. He should never go to bed hungry, nor allow himself to remain long hungry at any hour of the day, and it is best to order himself what he thinks will best suit him for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and not trust to chance, for in the latter case, if the only dish he could have partaken of with pleasure be not on the table, he will be constrained to eat, to his detriment, that which seldom agrees. The bath—a cold sponge in the morning—should never be neglected.

Now as to what sports or pastimes he had better engage in, he must suit himself, for much will depend upon his tastes, his age, and his agility. In summer, boating and cricket are glorious recreations, so too is lawn tennis; then in winter there are racquets and American bowls, and out of doors in good weather what better pastime than tricycling, or what more healthful to a man in good condition? The game of American bowls is a favourite wherever known. It keeps the mind well employed and exercises every muscle in the body. I should like to see alleys at every coffee palace.

I trust, then, I have made myself thoroughly understood; at all events, on this one point there can be no mistake: sports and pastimes form the most healthful kinds of exercise that any one can indulge in.

The dangers attached to them are few, and easily avoided. Apart from accidents, they are those that arise from catching cold when heated, from injury to the brain through over-excitement, or from reaction after too great exertion.