

Shock world study shows teenagers getting slower

Falling behind: While elite athletes get faster, young people are increasingly unfit.

The time it takes young people to run a mile has increased by one and a half minutes in the space of a generation. Will our couch-potato lifestyle lead to a crisis in public health?

Take a glance through the history of athletics, and you might naturally conclude that humans are getting fitter and faster all the time. In the past century, the record for the fastest mile has been broken more than 30 times, falling from four minutes and 14 seconds to three minutes and 43 seconds. Over the same period, the fastest marathon runners have knocked more than half an hour off their total times, and 100 metre sprinters have become a full second faster.

Each generation of sporting elites puts the previous one to shame. Athletes have powered past landmarks once thought to represent the limits of human physical potential. But there is a catch: as findings presented this week to the American Heart Association confirm, this triumphant progress is limited to those at the very top.

Research from 28 countries taking in 25 million children aged nine to 17 suggests that, far from powering past their parents' generation, children's speed and fitness has rapidly declined. If modern teenagers were to run a mile race against

their parents when young, they would lose by an average of one minute and 30 seconds. In the same period, **cardiovascular** fitness has plummeted by 15%.

Experts are not shy to name the cause of this decline: 'About 30% to 60% of the declines in endurance running performance can be explained by increases in fat mass,' says one. Our lifestyles are more **sedentary** than ever before, our diets are full of sugar and fat; and the result is serious physical decline.

In Britain, increasing youth participation in sport was one of the main targets for the London 2012 Olympics. But instead of rising, participation has decreased. Meanwhile, a recent study suggests that half of all children do less exercise than they need.

The growing gap between a speedy elite and a lumbering majority has been greeted with alarm. Not only does obesity cause potentially fatal physical conditions such as heart disease, it is also thought to damage mental health and even stunt teenagers' academic performance.

A sporting chance

Olympic organisers hoped that young people would take inspiration from stars like Mo Farah and **Jessica Ennis-Hill**. Witnessing top athletes perform at the height of their abilities is an inspiring spectacle, after all, which demonstrates the incredible perfection and performance the human body can achieve.

But critics argue that the focus on professional sport is part of the problem. Most people know that they will never run like **Usain Bolt**, so it's no surprise that we settle for watching him instead. Too many people think of sport as something to witness; too few see it as something to do. Physical activity should not be a spectacle, but a vital part of our everyday lives.

YOU DECIDE

1. Does watching great athletes make you more likely to do sport yourself?
2. If you had a time machine, what other competitions might be interesting to stage between today's teenagers and their parents when young?

ACTIVITIES

1. With your group, come up with some joint fitness goals: it could just be walking to and from school or something more ambitious.
2. Design an advertising campaign to encourage teenagers to take more exercise, and improve their fitness.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

"You have to expect things of yourself before you can do them." Michael Jordan"

What do you think?

Q & A

How much exercise do I need to do to stay fit?

The amount of exercise usually recommended for adults is half an hour, five times per week – so 150 minutes in total. But if you're less than 18 years old that is not enough: ideally, you should be physically active for at least an hour every day, including some periods of vigorous exercise.

An hour a day? I'm nowhere near that level!

Don't panic, you can fix that. And it doesn't have to be too painful. First, don't be too ambitious: start with a manageable amount of activity and build up gradually. Secondly, plan your exercise schedule in advance. Finally, find a way of keeping fit that you can actually enjoy – it could be anything from dancing or yoga to mountain biking. Being fit is good for your mind and your mood as well as your body.

WORD WATCH

Cardiovascular

Can your heart and lungs supply enough blood enriched with oxygen to your muscles? Can your muscles make good use of that oxygenated blood to produce the energy to move vigorously? Cardio refers to the heart, and vascular to the system of blood vessels.

Sedentary

This means sitting down a lot. It comes from the Latin sedere, the verb to sit.

Jessica Ennis-Hill

Pictured here, Ennis-Hill is a phenomenally versatile athlete. She won the Olympic Gold in the heptathlon at London 2012.

Usain Bolt

Commonly thought to be the fastest man ever. The Jamaican sprinter is the first to hold the Olympic Gold for both the 100 metres and 200 metres at the same time.