

HEART HEALTH

Saddle up to enjoy health and happiness

WITH the sun shining and lighter summer evenings, the time has come to get those wheels spinning and start cycling.

Cycling is a fun and easy way to keep fit, relieve stress, tone up muscles and keep your heart healthy.

Did you know that regular exercise can help reduce blood pressure, cholesterol and body fat - perfect for keeping your heart healthy and disease-free? And by cycling, you'll also save money on petrol and parking and whizz through the rush hour.

These are our top tips for getting the most out of pedal power:

■ Before setting out check your bike is in good condition and strap that helmet on;

■ Discover your local area, park or find a bike trail for a fun adventure with friends and family;

■ If you're a keen cyclist, give yourself a challenge by taking part in a local race or a charity cycling event;

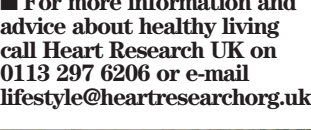
■ If you don't have a bike, why not hire one from a shop, borrow one from a friend or pick one up at a car boot sale;

■ If you haven't learned to ride a bike, start on grass with a friend to support you, take it slowly and you'll soon gain confidence;

■ Pop your bike on a train or on the car and head off further afield to enjoy the beautiful scenery on offer or try a biking holiday.

Think of the benefits pushing those pedals will reap for your health and heart.

■ For more information and advice about healthy living call Heart Research UK on 0113 297 6206 or e-mail lifestyle@heartresearch.org.uk



■ Cycling can be fun and is a great way to keep yourself fit

Free prescriptions provide a welcome healthy alternative

At a cost of £30m a year, ending the entitlement to free prescriptions for all in Wales could be a tempting cost-saving measure. But **Raj Aggarwal** explains why free prescriptions are beneficial to our health and save money in the long run



OFFICIAL Welsh Assembly Government statistics indicate that removing the charge for prescriptions has not increased the number of prescriptions dispensed.

Northern Ireland followed Wales' lead by scrapping prescription charges on April 1, while in Scotland they were cut to £3 an item on the same day. Prescriptions will be free by 2011.

It is fair to assume both Scotland and Northern Ireland have been heavily influenced by the introduction of the Assembly Government's flagship policy three years ago.

It is therefore strange that, at a time when Northern Ireland and Scotland are celebrating their move to free prescriptions, people in Wales continue to question the same policy.

Whatever the political rights and wrongs of free prescriptions, as a pharmacist on the frontline I would not wish to return to the old system. The main difficulty pharmacists faced with prescription charges was the inherent inequity of the exemption system.

When you try to differentiate between groups of patients you inevitably introduce conflict and inequity. Pharmacists on the frontline have had to deal with the fallout from the exemption system for years.

Whether the differentiation is based on age or on arbitrary medical conditions, it is fraught with difficulties.

For example, a 25-year-old, earning just over the minimum wage and struggling on a tight budget, would have to pay more than £7 - based on the current prescription charge in England - for each prescribed item.

But his or her neighbour, who may be affluent, receives free prescriptions simply because they are over 65.

Similar problems arise with the exemptions for certain illnesses. A 45-year-old diabetic who develops a chest infection would get their antibiotic free on the NHS but another 45-year-old, who is otherwise healthy, has to pay.

Whatever the political spin put on the introduction of free prescriptions in 2007 in Wales and more recently in Northern Ireland, it was clear to me as a pharmacist that patients were unhappy with the old system.

While situations like this were awkward for pharmacists, other situations were far more challenging to healthcare professionals. It was extremely difficult for a pharmacist to be put in a situation where a patient who

had been prescribed three items by a GP could only afford to buy two of them.

In this situation a pharmacist had to work out, in partnership with the patient, which item they should leave behind.

When all the prescribed items were important to the patient's health this was an impossible situation.

It was clear to any pharmacist put in this situation that prescriptions charges were a barrier to better health.

For pharmacists - who have always been uneasy about their role as tax collectors for the government - the advent of free prescriptions has made their lives and the lives of their patients so much easier.

Patients no longer need to complete complicated declaration forms written in small print on the back of prescription forms before they receive their medication and the administration processes in pharmacy and in the pricing bureau have been made so much easier.

Gone are the days of prescription fraud, when patients' exemption declarations were trawled over by a team of people employed simply to check thousands of prescription forms, costing about £830,000 a year.

There are a number of myths which appear to have developed around the introduction of free prescriptions and it is important that we look to see if there's any truth behind them.

The first of these is that prescription numbers have soared.

As a pharmacist I am trained not simply to accept information, but to look for the evidence that underpins the information and in this case the evidence is weak.

As the population of Wales continues to grow, as people live longer and new medicines are introduced a rise in prescription numbers is somewhat inevitable.

The best way to assess the impact of free prescriptions is to compare the growth of prescription numbers in Wales with the growth of prescription numbers in England where free prescriptions have not been introduced.

If we do that, we find the growth in Wales has been lower than the increase in prescription numbers in England for each year since 2007.

It is true that the number of prescriptions per head of population in Wales is higher than in England, but this has always been the case and has more to



■ Many myths have grown up around the free prescription policy operated in Wales

do with our industrial heritage than with the introduction of free prescriptions.

Another myth is that people would obtain on prescription medicines for minor ailments that they used to pay for.

In reality this again has not proved to be the case. GPs have been particularly robust in their management of the situation and have ensured patients only receive items on prescription that they genuinely require.

This is backed up by evidence from the Pharmaceutical Public Health Service, which has closely monitored a basket of selected medicines - prescribed

and over the counter - to check what's happened in the past three years. Its findings show there has been no noticeable change in the situation.

A study by Welsh researchers and published online in Value in Health concluded: "The overall impact of abolition (of prescription charges) was minimal."

This is not to say that everything is rosy in the prescription garden.

There are a number of items allowed to be supplied on prescription which would be more appropriately purchased over the counter and I would like to see Wales look more carefully at

the prescribing formulary.

The solution is quite simple and is something we pharmacists have been lobbying for over a number of years - a national community pharmacy minor ailments scheme, as they have in Scotland.

And, with waste medicines estimated to cost more than £15m a year in Wales, there are other ways to save money, which should be fully explored.

■ Raj Aggarwal is a board member of the National Pharmacy Association and owns Central Pharmacy in Cardiff

Excellent examples of best NHS Wales practice win top awards

THE first therapeutic day service for people with personality disorders in Wales has been named as one of six winners of the NHS Wales Awards.

Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board won the award in the citizens at the centre of service design and delivery category for the Taith service.

Both Cardiff and Vale and Abertawe Bro Morgannwg university health board won two awards apiece on Friday night.

The winners of the six categories were:

- Citizens at the centre of service design and delivery award - Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, for Taith;
- Developing a flexible and

sustainable workforce award - Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board, for its flexible retirement scheme;

■ Improving quality through better use of resources award - Powys Teaching Health Board for its scheme to reducing the harm and risks of hypothermia to surgical patients under general anaesthetic;

■ Working seamlessly across organisations award - Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, for its all-inclusive seamless intermediate care service;

■ Promoting better health and avoiding disease award - Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board for the gynaecological cancer rehabilitation scheme for the preven-

tion of lymphoedema and incontinence;

■ Improving patient safety award - Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, for its strategy to successfully implement the World Health Organisation's surgical safety checklist.

Paul Williams, chief executive of NHS Wales, who announced the winners, said: "The NHS Wales Awards recognise the innovative work that is being taken by healthcare staff every day to ensure they provide the best possible care for patients and a good working environment."

"The high quality of entries and excellence of the work this represents reflect a dedication

to deliver a world-class health service which is as safe and efficient as possible.

"These are excellent examples of best practice which will be shared across Wales and are a tribute to all staff involved."

The NHS Wales Awards were organised by the National Leadership and Innovation Agency for Healthcare (NLIAH) and the Welsh Assembly Government and recognise best practice and achievement. More than 190 entries were received by the judging panel of NHS experts who had the tough task of selecting the ultimate winners.

Dr Alan Willson, NLIAH's director of research and development, said: "The awards celebrate the great work which is being carried out across Wales and provide a valuable opportunity to learn from the successes to ensure that good standards are spread rapidly. "The innovations demonstrate that patients are benefiting from well designed and successful improvements to give them the best possible experience of health and healthcare. "We are particularly pleased that two of the awards reflect work that is being carried out as part of 1,000 Lives Plus to improve patient safety and reduce harm. "This is a key five-year programme for NHS Wales and shows we are already making good progress."

There were a total of 1,898 cases of MRSA reported between April 2009 and March 2010, down 35% from the previous year. In the same period, 25,604 cases of C.diff (Clostridium difficile) in patients aged two years or over were reported, a 29% reduction.

Why Don's knee is a new cap for Wales, and a step forward

CLARE HUTCHINSON clare.hutchinson@walesonline.co.uk

PIONEERING SURGERY

A PATIENT from South Wales has become the first in the country to undergo a pioneering new knee surgery.

Retired engineer Donald Randles, 75, was given a special made-to-measure knee replacement at Spire Cardiff Hospital in Pentwyn, one of just a handful in the UK to offer the procedure.

Developed in the US, the technology gives patients a knee replacement that is designed to be a precise fit.

It works by taking an MRI scan of the patient's knee, instead of the standard X-ray. These images are then sent to specialist engineers from Biomet, a Bridgend-based orthopaedic company, which studies the unique features and dimensions of the knee.

Using specialist computer software, the engineers then design bespoke positioning guides for the patient, which are used during the operation to support alignment and positioning of the implant.

Before the operation, the surgeon uses another computer program to plan how the knee will be fitted, providing them with a greater level of detail than previously available.

If the knee is just a few degrees out of alignment, the implant can fail, and this new surgery offers the most accurate fit yet.

Surgeon Simon White, who performs around 200 knee replacements a year said: "Not only is this new procedure far more accurate than the traditional knee implant, the computer software and bespoke nature of the positioning guides offers the potential of a less invasive procedure, meaning there are fewer muscle cuts, less blood loss and therefore a lower risk of complications."

"Furthermore, by improving



■ Don Randles, the first patient in Wales to receive the new 'signature knee' replacement, with his wife Pam PICTURE: Matthew Horwood ©

the positioning and size of the knee implant, we not only improve the feel for the patient, we also hope this will reduce the chance of revision surgery further down the line."

Mr Randles, who lives in Sully with his wife Pamela, 73, was referred to Mr White by his GP, after suffering from severe osteoarthritis for several years.

He said: "I've had bad knees for about 30 years and I was told I had arthritis around 10 years ago and was told by my doctor that it was OK for the meantime but that eventually something would have to be done. "It is only in the last five years that I began to suffer badly.

"My wife and I are walkers and we used to go for six or seven-mile walks, but by last year I could only manage half a mile, if at all.

"The pain was bad, and I missed my quality of life. I was never quite sure of it and I could feel the bones crushing in my knee with every step.

"On my first meeting with Mr White, he looked at my X-Rays and told me the only answer was a knee replacement as the bone had worn away completely.

"He also told me he could offer me a new procedure, a 'made-to-measure' knee. "He explained he hadn't done

it before, but I knew he operated on 200 patients a year, so after hearing all the benefits, I was happy to go for it.

"I felt quite privileged and excited about being the first patient in Wales to have this new operation.

"After having the MRI scan, I waited a couple of weeks for the positioning guides to be made.

"Mr White even showed me the model of my knee that was created for the operation. I was amazed to see the accuracy and the detail.

"The operation itself was performed under epidural, and by the next morning the nurses had me up and walking on crutches.

There is still some pain a couple of weeks on, but I am walking with the aid of a stick, and I'm delighted with how well the operation went, and how quickly I'm back on my feet."

Surgeon Simon White added: "When Donald first came to see me, not only was his osteoarthritis causing him severe pain, the wearing of the joint had also caused him to become very 'bow-legged' or 'knock-kneed'."

"The precision of the Signature Knee alignment allowed me to rectify this, and correct Donald's entire gait, so he will look an entirely different man on his future walking holidays."

BREAKING HEALTH

newsbulletin

Hospital superbug infections fall

MRSA and C.diff infections have fallen by a third in hospitals in England and Wales, according to annual figures from the Health Protection Agency.

There were a total of 1,898 cases of MRSA reported between April 2009 and March 2010, down 35% from the previous year.

In the same period, 25,604 cases of C.diff (Clostridium difficile) in patients aged two years or over were reported, a 29% reduction.

Children warned over mobiles

LEAFLETS are being handed out to schoolchildren in Wales to warn them of the dangers of mobile phone use.

The bilingual leaflets, produced by the Assembly Government, advise children to limit their use of mobile phones in case radio waves are in the future found to be dangerous.

The Chief Medical Officer for Wales, Dr Tony Jewell, said: "Although current research indicates that using mobile phones does not appear to cause health problems, more work is still to be done.

Petrol-station alcohol debate

ALCOHOL Concern Cymru has started a public debate about whether alcohol should be sold in petrol stations in Wales.

In a survey of eight local authority areas in Wales, the charity found 33% petrol stations sold alcohol. Alcohol Concern Cymru's Andrew Misell said: "We need to think carefully about whether making alcohol available at petrol stations is in the best interest of all road users."

Roadshow gives asbestos advice

A ROADSHOW was held in Cardiff last week to raise awareness of the devastating effects of asbestos exposure.

Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan have the worst mortality rate in Wales for mesothelioma, a type of cancer that in almost all cases is caused by asbestos exposure.

More than 200 people sought advice and information from The National Asbestos Helpline.

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