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The workout

Trying to get fitter? You must be having a laugh

Laughing your way to fitness is the latest fad in American gyms. At the Crunch chain, stand-up comedians are turning into personal trainers to front the Abs'solutely Hysterical class, a 30-minute session (with plenty of fattest jibes) that aims to work the abdominal muscles for that washboard midriff. Warwick McNeill, a physiotherapist based at the Physioworks clinic in West London, says that laughter uses the transversus abdomens, a muscle that helps to flatten the stomach. According to McNeill, "The real key to strengthening the transversus abdominus lies in very subtle movements. Laughing is ideal because it contracts the muscle appropriately."

Viagra may boost more than your performance between the sheets, according to a study at Stanford University's medical school. Male subjects were asked to take the erectile dysfunction drug before riding stationary bicycles while breathing through masks to simulate high altitudes. The drug improved their times over 6km (3.7 miles) by an average of 39 per cent. Military researchers are conducting a study to see if Viagra could help soldiers to function better at high altitudes, such as in the mountains of Afghanistan. "It provides a pretty clear advantage to some people," said Anne Friedlander, the senior author of the study, which appears in the current issue of the *Journal of Applied Physiology*.

Been avoiding exercise? Let your gym membership lapse for too long? New research reveals that it's never too late to make amends. In a study at Duke University in Baltimore, middle-aged, overweight adults who were sedentary for six months overcame the negative health effects of inactivity with just six months of exercise. "We observed that individuals who experienced the greatest decline while inactive appeared to obtain the largest improvements during the exercise regimen that followed," Jennifer Robbins, an exercise physiologist, reported this week at the annual conference of the American College of Sports Medicine.

Cramping and muscle pain after a workout can be reduced by a regular supplement of the pine bark extract pycnogenol — which is widely available in health stores. Researchers at the University of Würzburg in Germany gave a 200mg supplement of pycnogenol to exercisers every day for four weeks. The researchers found a significant decrease in the number of cramps. "Poor circulation in the muscle is known to cause cramps, and pycnogenol improved the cramping in patients by stimulating blood flow to their muscle tissue," says Professor Peter Rohdewald, a lead author of the study, which is published in this month's *Angiology* journal.

TRAINING TIP

Because they spend so much time in the sun, sporty types have a higher risk of developing skin cancer, yet few apply an adequate sunscreen before their workout. Professor Brian Adams, a dermatologist at the University of Cincinnati's school of medicine, reports that only 9 per cent of athletes questioned in his most recent study said that they used a sunscreen rated at SPF 15 or higher. Adams says that we should avoid outdoor workouts between 10am and 4pm, when the sun's rays are most intense, and he advises us to choose our workout clothing for its sun-protective features: a tightly woven, white fabric that covers the back, shoulders and neck is best. Take extra caution near water, snow and sand as they reflect the damaging rays of the sun, which can increase your chance of sunburn.