



'WE CAN REBUILD HIM...

Stress can wear your body down, but one hi-tech centre has developed a plan to combat the effects. Men's Fitness sent Ben Webb along to discover how he – and you – can stay out of the cardiac ward

'You could be a woman,' declares the young lady with a measuring a tape and a wicked smile. 'What?' I snort. 'Yes. But don't worry. Your measurements are fine for a healthy male.' 'That's reassuring,' I reply, staring at my stomach. 'So I don't, in theory, have a beer gut?' 'That's right.'

The surprising news about my feminine qualities comes after my body composition has been assessed at the Adidas-funded Wellness Centre in Stockport, Cheshire. I'm undergoing a pioneering health MOT and, over the next two hours, the team of gurus will put me through a series of physical tests designed to illuminate the stress and risk factors in my lifestyle that could spell a heart attack.

Initially, the course was only for Adidas employees, but last year the doors opened to staff from other companies. The Project LIFE programme – Lifestyle Intervention For Executives – is now attracting interest from managers all over the country, including the careworn bosses of the Premiership. Kevin Keegan says, 'This support makes all the difference – especially with our busy lives.'

To illustrate the philosophy of the centre, director Dorian Dugmore tells a story. Imagine, if you will, that a heart attack victim is a man drowning in a river. 'The cardiologist is the man who dives in and brings him back to life,' he explains. 'We, in contrast, believe that it makes more sense to walk upriver and help him avoid falling in in the first place. We believe in preventative medicine.'

Dugmore is no over-enthusiastic health preacher – he's got a Brummie accent and a wry sense of humour for starters – but he is, after years spent converting cardiac patients from bath chair drivers into marathon runners, passionate about his chosen subject. 'If we concentrate on predicting stress-related disease and follow up with lifestyle changes then we can do a huge amount to improve our lives,' he says. 'Stress is a killer.'

Stress epidemic

Now I'm no high-flying executive with an 80-hour week. I'm a journalist, which is hardly a real job – facing the odd deadline and liquid lunch meeting. So why do I feel like a coiled spring about to pop? Stress is an insidious opponent and you don't need to be a high flier to suffer from it. I can point to two Jekyll and Hyde children, a hefty mortgage, a freelancer's paranoia, no time for the gym or hobbies, hangers (too big), pensions (too small), unfinished DIY jobs... my checklist goes on and on.

We each have our own list. According to the Equal Opportunities Commission, British men work the longest hours in Europe. Stress strikes hardest at 35-44-year-olds, according to a Mintel report into healthy lifestyles, when the demands of both work and family are at their most acute. And that's why I'm here.

Each of the various tests yields a score that gives you an indication of how healthy you are and a starting point for a campaign that comes complete with fitness and nutrition

programmes, e-mail support, targets and reassessment. Knowing your own numbers, from cholesterol to VO₂ max levels, gives you a sense of understanding, control and the motivation to improve.

Health consultant Louise Dickinson, who has seen a stressed army of men begin to chill out and contract in size, explains, 'It's great to see the numbers reduced. It shows they've made real lifestyle changes and that gives us an unbelievable buzz.'

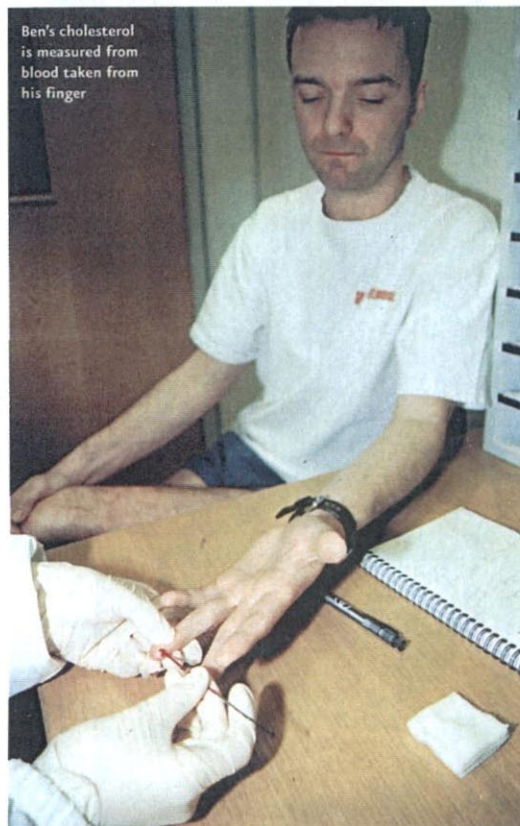
Learning by numbers

As the tests progress, the numbers flow thick and fast. A good example is cholesterol, the unseen killer. I know having too much of this fiendish sludge in my veins is a bad thing, but, unlike normal fat, it leaves no evidence. A simple procedure does the trick. Louise sits me down and jabs my finger with a little pen-like gadget that pricks the skin and draws blood, which is then tested. Cholesterol levels can be misleading because the most important factor is the *balance* between bad (LDL) and good (HDL) cholesterol. I feel like a guilty man awaiting my sentence. This is where all those beers, curries and fry-ups come home to roost.

While we wait I perform the sit and reach test, which reveals how flexible I am, especially in the lower back and hip regions. I sit on the floor with my legs straight out in front of me and reach along a lined board. My fingers quiver as they touch the 16 mark. Louise isn't impressed. 'Your score,' she informs me, 'puts you in the "below average" category for a 64-year-old.'

Just as the embarrassment is disappearing, the jury returns. 'Your total cholesterol, including LDL, is high,' says Louise. 'But you also have high HDL, which is the good stuff. The ratio between the two is 5:1, which is *just* about acceptable. Cholesterol is an issue for you. You should eat Shredded Wheat, brown bread, brown rice and wholewheat pasta. And drink at least eight glasses of water a day.'

Nutrition is so crucial to our health that it's seldom out of the conversation. Louise says, 'Most executives don't have a disastrous diet, but drinking is a problem. With all the social pressures to drink it's unlikely most people will give it up, but they might cut down or switch to red wine. Red wine is good because it's low in calories and



Ben's cholesterol is measured from blood taken from his finger

▷ high in antioxidants, which is good for the heart and much more healthy than the average beer, which has 250 calories in a small bottle. Seven of those in a night and you've almost had a day's worth of calories.'

Louise is informative without being hectoring. The course is about encouraging clients to make their own decisions about their health rather than being lectured. The numbers, rather like an accountant's preoccupation, allow us to set targets and then reassess ourselves.

Louise also measures my blood pressure (130/80), which is deemed acceptable and my lung function. Even for a mild asthmatic the results are OK.

And finally it's time for the daunting VO₂ max test, designed to find out the maximum amount of oxygen my body is able to utilise while exercising. It's a simple matter of running on a treadmill, which gets faster and steeper until I can't run any more. What fun. VO₂ is measured in

CASE STUDY: MANAGING DIRECTOR

NAME: Gordon Baird

AGE: 42

OCCUPATION: Managing Director, Adidas UK

'I was an active sportsman and played club squash until 1994, but then I moved to America. My life began to change and the rot set in. Leading an unhealthy lifestyle catches up with you.

'I'd be away in a hotel and I'd end up drinking beer instead of training. But one day I realised I needed to take control. I'm not a morning person and I decided to train in the evenings, but work always got in the way. So I started going to the gym at 7am and it's worked. I eat sensibly and still enjoy a drink, but now I'm aware of what different foods do it's easier to say no. The physical improvements are obvious. I lost the weight of a small child

from around my middle.

'As your measurements improve it's a great motivation.

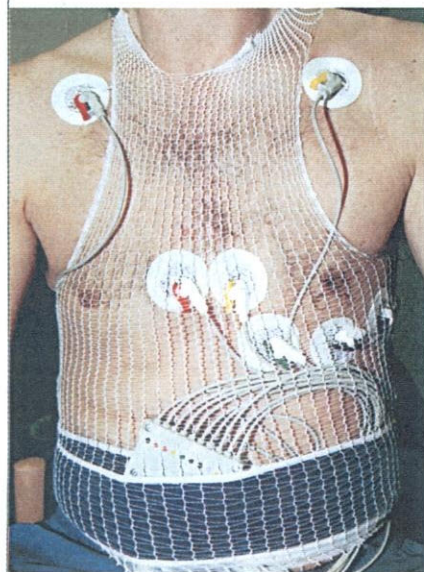
I find I've got much higher energy levels and my sense of wellbeing has gone through the roof. I can play football with the kids in the garden without getting knackered. It's been mentally beneficial, too. I don't suffer from stress too much, but training allows me to unwind. It's an important part of a balanced lifestyle and working for company like Adidas, which is in the sports sector, you have to practise what you preach. There's no doubt that the Wellness Centre has benefited the staff's wellbeing and hence the company's performance.'



computer monitor showing my vital signs, calls it a day. VT, my score was 43.5ml per minute, a guesstimate of my VO₂ max is 46ml per minute or so. And that's pretty good – excellent, in fact, for my age group. I may be on the verge of hanging up my Sunday football boots but, over the years, all that aerobic work has been seriously beneficial.

Relieved, I warm down. While I'm resting, still wired for the sound of my heart, Dorian taps a paper printout.

STRESS STRIKES HARDEST AT 35-44-YEAR OLDS



millilitres (amount of oxygen) per kilogram (your weight) per minute (time) you use. Louise shaves my chest to ensure the electrodes that track my heart are accurate and then the cluster of ten wires are kept in position by a Rab C Nesbitt-style string vest.

Running on empty

After taking my resting pulse, I prepare for action. But Dorian has heard me cough and checks my chest. I'm not allowed to go all out, but to my ventilatory threshold (VT), a less stressful mark. It's daunting enough. I start walking and the treadmill begins to increase in speed every few minutes. I'm breathing into a snorkel-like tube which is attached to machine that measures my oxygen uptake.

I'm cruising... then the angle increases. From easy it turns nasty. I'm prepared to continue, but Dorian, who is peering at a

'I'm glad we stopped, Ben,' he says. 'You've just had a premature ventricular contraction. Nothing to worry about, but it shows your heart was a little stressed...'

Over a cup of tea, Dorian runs through my results. In general I'm not in bad nick, apart from having the flexibility of an OAP and high-ish cholesterol. 'Cholesterol is an issue Dorian confirms. 'More fibre, less saturated fat. Instead of margarine or butter you should try Benecol.'

Being reduced to a set of statistics is a bit uncomfortable. I muse on the train home while sipping red wine, but the truth often hurts. I know what I have to do to improve my numbers. I have to stretch more, do some solid training and have a diet rethink. They're not dramatic changes. There's only one thing that's still troubling me. I still can't get over the fact they said I had the body composition of a woman.

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