

Secrets of old age revealed

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Leading health specialists last night called on the Welsh public to take responsibility for their own health by adopting a healthier lifestyle to help stave off the onset of disease and premature death.

A [national survey](#), published last month, revealed that a third of adults' day-to-day activities were limited because of [health problems](#) and that 58% of adults were classified as overweight or obese.

At a major [health](#) summit organised by Cardiff University, representatives from Welsh Government, Public Health Wales,

universities, health services, charities and members of the public will be presented with the findings of a 35-year study – still ongoing – which has uncovered the enormous health benefits of following a healthy lifestyle.

Tracking the lifestyle habits of 2500 men living in the Caerphilly area from 1979 to the present day, researchers from Cardiff University's School of Medicine have found that those who followed four or five specified healthy steps – who represent less than one percent of the total cohort- had a 70% reduced chance of developing diabetes; 60% reduced incidents of heart attacks and strokes; 40% fewer cancers; and a reduction of 60% in cases of dementia.

Now in their late-70s to mid-90s, 30 men from the original Caerphilly cohort will attend the summit as living testimony to the benefits conferred by healthy living. The Caerphilly Cohort Study is the longest running study of its kind to probe the influence of environmental factors on chronic [disease](#).

Speaking at the summit will be Professor Mark Drakeford AM, Minister for Health and Social Services, who will outline his new strategy for the improvement of public health in Wales. Also among the speakers are Professor Sir Mansel Aylward, Chair of Public Health Wales and Dr John Gallacher, who leads the UK Dementia Research Platform. The event will be chaired by Cardiff University's Professor Julie Williams, who is Wales' Chief Scientific Adviser and spearheads a global Alzheimer's study.

Referring to the summit as the "swan song" of his career, Professor Peter Elwood, who has led the Caerphilly study since its inception, sees the event as a clear evidence-base for a 'wake-up' challenge to the people of Wales: "Thirty years ago, only 25 men in our study – less than one per cent - followed all five of our recommended healthy steps, which included taking regular exercise, non-smoking, a healthy bodyweight, a

healthy diet and a low alcohol intake," he said.

"Although following these steps do not give them complete protection against disease; the men who, despite living healthily, developed a disease, did so at a much older age than the men neglectful of their lifestyle. Thus the development of heart disease was delayed by up to 12 years, and it was up to around an additional six years before dementia took its grip.

"Yet on the less rosy end of the spectrum, 40 men in every 100 lived a life so neglectful that by any definition their lifestyle was unhealthy, and they experienced none of the reductions in disease. That was 30 years ago. The appalling fact is that recent surveys across the whole of Wales yield almost identical proportions of men and women following the healthy, and the unhealthy lifestyles that had been found in Caerphilly 35 years ago. As a nation, we must wake up to the preventive power of living a healthy life!"

According to the recently published Welsh Health Survey, less than one per cent of adults in Wales follow all five healthy behaviours, as prescribed by Professor Elwood, and the lifestyle of 39% of the population can be considered unhealthy.

Chief among the aims of the summit is to present to health officials quantitative evidence of the benefits that a healthy lifestyle confer on life quality and longevity. Professor Elwood hopes to encourage health officials and charities to renew their efforts in influencing the public to take up more of his prescribed healthy behaviours.

Drawing from unpublished survey data and blood samples taken from the cohort at various junctures in the study, further analyses are planned. These will investigate the impact of lifestyle on cognitive decline, on prostate cancer and on bowel cancer. The cancer-fighting properties of

natural chemicals found in fruit and vegetables are also the subject of continued investigation and will be published in the coming year.

Professor Elwood describes the 2500-strong Caerphilly cohort study as a pilot for a much larger study, involving over half a million subjects in the UK. The gathering of evidence on cognitive decline and dementia will now continue through the UK BIOBANK study, now led by Professor John Gallacher who works alongside Professor Elwood in the School of Medicine.

Unhealthy living has accounted for around 10 per cent of the costs of the NHS in Wales since the study first started, while the annual expenditure on prevention and public health services in Wales is estimated to have been £280M.

The 'Healthy Ageing' summit will be held in the All Nations Centre in Cardiff between 13:00 – 20:30 on 30 October.

Health and Social Services Minister Mark Drakeford said:

"The title of the lecture makes it clear that health is everybody's responsibility.

"A prudent approach looks to the future – it has a focus on preventative action and, as a sustainable approach, it uses resources carefully.

"It aims to build trust and confidence between our services and those who use them and to encourage the development of a confident civil society where people take responsibility for their own health and make a contribution to the communities in which they live."

Clare Walton, Research Communications Manager for Alzheimer's Society, said:

'We have known for some time that what is good for your heart is also good for your head. The landmark Caerphilly study, part funded by Alzheimer's Society, showed that healthy living can reduce the chances of dementia by up to 60 per cent.

'These large, longitudinal studies are expensive and complicated to run, but are essential to understand how dementia can be prevented. We will continue to fund, and communicate, the findings of studies like these, hoping to reduce the impact of dementia in the future.'

Sarah Powell, Chief Executive of Sport Wales, said:

"It's clear that we must make healthier life choices and halt the tide of inactivity if we are to become a healthier nation. But it's what we do next that is paramount. We need to drive a mass shift in public thinking but we can only do that if we all work together which is why we welcome Cardiff University's Health Summit. Sport in Wales is ready to play its part in the future of Wales' health and we look forward to meeting and building relationships with those who are ready and prepared to make a difference."

Professor John Gallacher (Cardiff University), Director of the UK Dementia Platform, said:

"The Caerphilly Study has made a tremendous contribution to UK Science and has paved the way for UK Biobank and the Dementias Platform. These are exciting times as we gear-up to do research that will bring significant public benefit, helping older people everywhere to have longer and more satisfying lives."

Julie Ward, Senior Cardiac Nurse at the BHF, part-funder of the cohort study, said:

"For many years, we've funded research that's continually shown that making healthy lifestyle choices improves people's heart health. This research in Caerphilly reinforces this message, showing the real life impact of how habits like regular exercise, a healthy diet and not smoking significantly cut people's risk of cardiovascular conditions such as heart attack and stroke.

"Cardiff University's Health Summit is a great opportunity to use this evidence to encourage people across the country to take steps to keep their bodies and hearts healthy."

Provided by Cardiff University

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