

Small changes to lifestyle can help people LEAP into retirement

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Small lifestyle changes involving physical activity, healthy eating and maintaining social networks can set the stage for happier and healthier futures for people after retirement.

Led by John Mathers, Professor of Human Nutrition at Newcastle University's Institute for Ageing, the five-year LiveWell project assessed how well people will age after retirement. The researchers studied the key issues surrounding retirement, and what factors promote health and wellbeing at this stage in life.

Based on the best scientific evidence and in discussion with older people, the LiveWell team developed an interactive website known as 'LEAP' (Lifestyle, Eating, Activity & Planning) which provides personalised advice and support to enhance healthy ageing through greater [physical activity](#), better eating patterns and wider, and more meaningful, social interactions.

The project, which was funded by the Medical Research Council, involved 75 people across the North East aged 51 – 71 and from a range of backgrounds. Before offering customised advice to the study participants, the LiveWell team measured individual fitness indicators such as grip strength, lung function and processing speed in the brain.

Findings from the study were shared with LiveWell study participants at an event this week, as well as representatives from older people's organisations, local authorities and employers - who also had the opportunity to undergo some of the same tests themselves.

Professor John Mathers said: "While the experience of ageing varies from person to person, the LiveWell project has shown that we have more control than we think over how we age. Retirement is a great time to take stock and to make changes which will benefit us for many years to come. Identifying and accessing potentially meaningful social roles after leaving work; identifying opportunities to eat well, to be physically active and to build or maintain social relationships can have big benefits for health and wellbeing after [retirement](#)."

After taking part in the study, many of the participants have changed their physical activity or diet behaviour by using the LEAP website, while others have started to explore voluntary work and other social activities.

Margaret Vickers, (pictured) from Redcar, was one of the people involved in the study. Although she exercises regularly at home and eats a healthy diet, Margaret identified ways of improving her well-being thanks to participating in the LiveWell project.

She said: "The programme certainly made me look at my lifestyle and that of my family. I thought we followed a healthy diet and exercise pattern, but with a few changes which the programme showed me I found that we could even improve on it. I have started to eat more oily fish and switched from beef mince to turkey which has been a revelation as it's so much nicer and lower in fat.

"I really enjoyed the tests I did with the LiveWell team - that actually helped my confidence as it made me realise that I was fitter and more mentally agile than I'd given myself credit for. I was really pleased to find that my scores improved after three months too. That was a bonus!

"The LEAP website was so easy to use and really helpful and useful as a check list to see how you could make the changes to your lifestyle to

benefit our health and wellbeing. I particularly liked the diet pages with the recipes and different foods to try. "

The LiveWell team is now planning to extend the project to a much larger number of people in more parts of the country and to see if using LEAP enables people planning to retire to make the lifestyle changes which will help them to maintain better health and wellbeing in the long term.

Councillor Sheelagh Clarke, Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing at Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council, who have worked with the team on this project, said: "We think this project could really benefit the lives of our retirees in Redcar & Cleveland by being able to give them helpful tips and advice tailored around their life. Hopefully with everything LiveWell has to offer users we can see residents in all corners of the borough have healthier, more active retirements."

Newcastle University's Chairman, Mark I'Anson, who celebrated his 60th birthday recently, has been involved in the LiveWell project too. He underwent tests by the LiveWell team to measure how healthy his body is before he embarks on a 700km bike ride in the Alps this summer to support research into ageing at Newcastle University. A new set of tests will be taken when Mark returns to evaluate the change in his fitness before and after his cycling challenge.

Provided by Newcastle University

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