

Gym'll Fix it

My mother never went near a gym. Nor did my grandmother. Or great-grandmother, come to that. Nor did they voluntarily undertake any physical activity of any kind.

I, though, am very different from my sedentary female forbears. Although now a grandmother of five and technically allowed to put my feet up, I work out three or four times a week.

And I'm not talking about gentle old-lady exercises, either. I do tough routines such as body combat, circuit training, step and weight lifting, all to the kind of loud, funky, heavy-beat music that is supposed to make grandmothers shudder in fear and loathing.

Although I could never give Paula Radcliffe a run for her money, the workouts I have been doing for 15 years have made me fit, trim and supple, and I am perfectly able to keep up with the 20 and 30 year olds who make up the majority of the classes.

Nor am I alone. Esther Rantzen, at 64, has found that frenetic ballroom dancing has enabled her to regain much of the suppleness of her youth and lose her incipient dowager's hump. After six weeks of intense training for BBC2's Strictly Come Dancing, Esther had lost 12 lbs and four inches around her waist. "My skin began to glow and my posture improved," she said. "For the first time in my life, I was really enjoying daily exercise."

Joan Bakewell at 72 swears by her twice-weekly Pilates classes. Tina Moore, former wife of footballer Bobby, has taken up energetic tango dancing in her sixties.

The redoubtable Eileen Fowler, one of the first television exercise gurus, was still conducting exercise classes in her nineties.

The benefits of regular exercise, for body, mind, spirit and warding off the ageing process have been demonstrated so many times we hardly need reminding of them. From every quarter we are encouraged to get moving. Yet the latest statistics show that only two per cent of women do any exercise at all.

Why? The truth is that, however much exercise is hyped as a fun, enjoyable activity, the majority of women find it difficult, if not actually impossible, to embark on and continue an effective regime. For one thing, you don't feel dreadful, or even any different, if you don't do it.

Then, anybody who has not willingly moved a muscle for thirty years will find they are stiff and uncoordinated. Also, the horrors of struggling into Lycra sportswear and looking at yourself in the mirror when you are no longer age 16 and size 10 can hardly be exaggerated.

Further, it can be difficult to find the time. Or the motivation. Yet you know you should.

Is there an answer? Yes! There are two secrets, I believe, to successful exercising.

The first is that you have to join a suitable class, as you will never keep it up on your own; and the second is that you **MUST MUST MUST** exercise to music. It is the music, above all, which provides the rhythm and the motivation to complete the routines.

Could you imagine dancing without music? It is exactly the same with exercising, which is a form of dance, after all.

Today, exercises are not just for the young, fit and healthy. Even if you are diabetic, have bad knees or a bad back, suffer from arthritis or chronic joint pain, there is a movement to-music exercise class catering specially for your needs.

Extend, for instance, is an exercise training scheme aimed at the over-60s and 'less able' of any age, as the brochure delicately puts it. Routines are carried out in bare feet, and there are seated and floor exercises to avoid gravity problems.

And, of course, there is always music. Instructor Judith Holpin, who has been running Extend classes for many years, says: "I simply don't know how anybody can keep up an exercise routine without music.

"Yoga may be very good, but without any music, the dropout rate is enormous. Having music enables you to move rhythmically and keep up the repetitions which are so necessary for suppleness."

Judith admits that starting an exercise regime is often the most difficult problem. "It can be nerve-racking to walk into a strange class where all seem to know each other.

"To overcome this, we recommend going to a class with a friend. The social aspect is extremely important, and we emphasise this, so that people actually look forward to going to classes. There is a coffee break in the middle of our two-hour sessions."

With any class situation, a good instructor will briefly explain the workout, and offer a welcome and introductions to newcomers. When this happens, you soon become part of the group, and your exercise classes form an element of your social life. I have certainly made many good friends through my aerobics classes.

In order to gain lasting benefit, you really need to attend a class three times a week; a big commitment, but the rewards are huge, as well. "Our classes are designed to maintain suppleness and mobility," Judith Holpin says. "Stamina and fat-burning come from fast aerobics, which most of our students can't do. We concentrate on lowering blood pressure, keeping circulation healthy and above all, maintaining bone strength.

"One lady gave up her classes at 75 as her back was beginning to crumble. Her doctor said that without the classes, her back would have crumbled years ago. Exercise classes, even ones as gentle as ours, delay the ageing process beyond belief. If only more people exercised regularly, the NHS would save millions."

For diabetics, the British Diabetic Association runs special Fit-For-Life classes, also to funky music, where blood pressure levels are taken before and after each class. Colin Allinson, 40, from Middlesex University's Department of Sports Science, says: "I am a diabetic and can't recommend these classes highly enough. We do an hour's session which includes a proper warm-up and cool down, squats and jogs.

"It's a cardiovascular routine designed to change the lifestyle of diabetics, and it works."

If you like water, there is nothing to beat aquarobics. Here, the routines can be quite tough, with Aquafit classes the toughest of all, but again, because of the water, the gravity problem does not arise, and the classes are very suitable for arthritis sufferers, for example.

Also, there is a chummy, matey atmosphere at the sessions. Aquarobics was developed 20 years ago by chartered physiotherapist Glenda Baum as a way of exercising to music in water, and they have become so popular they are now on offer at most municipal baths.

Let the last word go to 82-year old Helen Gurley Brown, founder of Cosmopolitan magazine, who says "Even at my age, nothing, but nothing ever interferes with my exercise routine.

"Because I have exercised all my life I can still wear a sleeveless dress – and not many octogenarians can say that!"