



It's no state secret that human beings are creatures of habit. Their day, especially if they are based in the Arabian Gulf, is dominated by work. Any free time in between is devoted to food. Or shopping. Or the television. Or any number of 3G devices that never let the Internet get any farther than a touchscreen away.

You may notice that exercise doesn't figure at all in this list. The sad part is as creatures of habit, we also become slaves to our bad habits – finding excuses for that last cigarette, that last drink (fizzy or otherwise), that last shawerma – that must justify our decision not to take care of ourselves. Which is why Qatar's very first National Sports Day should serve as a wake-up call for all those who have been ignoring their health in favour of their "busyness" in the daily business of life.

The National Sports Day is being planned as an annual event, on every second Tuesday of February, to drive home the message that it is important to be active and healthy in order to be alive.

This year, several initiatives and events have been announced to encourage Qatar's residents to step out and enjoy not just the bracing winter weather, but also to ponder ways to cultivate a healthy lifestyle that includes physical activity in a greater measure than before.

The Sports Day does mean business – rapid urbanisation in the Arabian Gulf has meant a greater number of lifestyle diseases being reported in the region.

A study recently published in Avicenna, an open access, peer-reviewed journal from QScience.com and headed by Dr Tam Truong Donnelly of the University of Calgary-Qatar, shows that cardiovascular disease and coronary artery diseases such as acute myocardial infarction are rising rapidly in the country.

According to the World Health Organisation, up to 60% of males in Arab countries and up to 70% of females are overweight and obese.

Travelling by car is thought to be a leading cause of inactivity in the Gulf countries, as is the habit of "shisha" (water pipe) and a diet dominated increasingly by convenience food. Added to this is the cultural perception that being fat is a sign of a privileged background.

The rising level of technology and computerisation in the workspace has made most office-goers become chained to their desks. Prolonged sitting is in fact now being labelled as a new disease, leading many companies in the West to adopt "standing desks".

There is a tendency among Qatar's residents to show off their trips to the mall and pushing shopping trolleys as their main fitness habit. Some say housework like vacuum-cleaning and dish-washing is exercise. But as any qualified fitness professional will tell you, these activities cannot be as fruitful as a well-designed workout.

With today being a public holiday, you have 24 hours to discover ways to a healthier life ahead.

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