**Knit Yourself Fitter**

**By Leon Horton**

**Knitting, knitting, knitting – what can I possibly say about knitting that might be of interest? Well, it’s an aerobic exercise that improves fitness, reduces the risk of obesity and can help fight against heart disease... Except that it isn’t. It isn’t, it doesn’t and it can’t. And yet, according to a recent study in *Psychology* *Today*, there are many health benefits to be had if you take up this truly artisan craft...**

Knit one, purl one... drop a clanger. It isn’t every day you find yourself face-to-navel with a man in the pub who looks like a rugby player. But when I recently mocked the ancient art of knitting, questioning the sanity of the woolly-minded, I was quietly but firmly castigated by a giant who could squash me like a fly that not only was ‘casting on’ an inexpensive and wholly positive experience, but that he himself was an utter knitter.

It was a rude awakening, and one which could have seen me in need of stitches. As it was, as has often been the case, a better man than I suggested I should go away and think about my life. And of course, me being me, I did just the opposite. Instead, I got to thinking: are there really any health benefits from making scarves and baby bonnets?

And the short answer is yes. British physiotherapist Betsan Corkhill - who founded *Stitchlinks* in the city of Bath to promote knitting as a therapeutic practice - regards knitting as a “constructive addiction” that can replace bad habits such as smoking or binge drinking.

She believes that many chronically ill or disabled people can overcome a feeling of aimlessness simply by taking up knitting: “The rhythmic repetitive movements put us in the present moment, distracting us from mulling over the past or fear of the future. This relaxation response is known to bring down blood pressure and the heart rate, and helps to prevent stress.”

Corkhill also reports that knitting appears to be a pain-reliever, since: “Pain doesn’t originate where we feel it, but in our brains. But the brain can’t concentrate on two compelling activities at the same time. Knitting can quite literally take your mind off pain.”

But we don’t need studies to tell us that staying occupied is good for our health. For those of us who are ill, unemployed or simply bored by so-called ‘social’ media such as Facebook, we know that having a hobby of any kind - particularly when it involves social interaction - releases serotonin into the brain, improves our mood and makes us happy.

My sister Karen, a witty little knitter who once presented me with a crocheted Dalek, agrees: “To me it’s about having a creative outlet. I also like the idea that it connects me to the past, as it seems increasingly important to keep old skills alive in a society that relies heavily on technology. Both my children have taken an interest in knitting and it’s rewarding to know that I’ve passed on a skill.”

Personally, I’m not ready to take up the needle myself - unlike that rugby player in the pub I don’t have the arms for it. But if you’re keener than I am you might like to check out your local knitting group.

Oh, by the way: the rugby player who could have squashed me like a fly? That was a yarn.