

The information below is purely advisory. It does not mean that anyone giving up strenuous sport will or will not necessarily be safe from health complications in later life but it is based on our investigations with top health professionals and our distillation of their views. RALPHH accepts no liability associated with the health of an individual who has studied this information, acted upon the content of these pages but who encounters personal health difficulties.

Information may be subjected to changes based upon reviewing further scientific understanding at differing future times.

There can be many reasons why an individual may decide to move from participating in a strenuous sport such as rowing, cycling or marathon running. Muscle strains, medical advice, pressure on time or uncompetitiveness brought about by age are just some of the potential reasons. Equally, people may decide that they simply want to try something new and that a busy timetable cannot accommodate all of their current commitments.

What is clearly understood is that suddenly giving up on a regular high-intensity type of exercise and doing nothing about winding down can cause harm. That is why it is best to have a structured plan in mind and maintain the discipline to make this work on a personal level for you.

Starting with the most obvious way you could help yourself is by regulating your diet. Almost by definition athletes need more calories and particular minerals to maximise performance. But it is too easy to want to retain specific foods or bigger portions when this is unnecessary and could be counter-productive. For example, cholesterol build up in the body may be accentuated, when previously the exercise undertaken could have burnt off any negative impacts. Retaining the diet you had as an athlete could cause both heart problems and diabetes. At its most simplest, addressing the problem could be helped by eating from smaller plates and so reducing portion sizes.

Cholesterol build up impacts upon the efficiency of blood circulation and is most commonly seen in later years as coronary artery disease. It is far less common in younger people but the foundations of it being a problem regularly occurs as a consequence of a health issue that started much earlier. The wrong type of cholesterol is associated with heart attacks, strokes and circulatory complications.

When taking part in competitive sport, the heart establishes the best rhythm at the time to cope with any strain. The rhythm returns to normal for that person after the exercise has been completed. Our bodies become used to such changes, but moving away from this to a more sedentary lifestyle can produce circumstances in which either the rhythm of the heart becomes a little more erratic (arrhythmia) or the very pace of the heart beat can become too slow. Many fine athletes in their day have in later life needed to explore the value of considering a pacemaker.

Helping the heart and circulation to deal with a less rigorous routine can best begin with the retention of athletic activity that is less stressful than the original sport. Taking the best of advice, Sir Steve Redgrave initially moved away from rowing to take up marathon running for a short period. It is not uncommon for long-distance cyclists to start their retirement from this sport by work in a

gymnasium and for ultra fit hockey or rugby players to combine supervised strength and exercise sessions in local clubs or leisure centres. As is well known, swimming is really helpful in developing a much less intensive means of exercise, if adopted in a disciplined but leisurely environment.

Of course another major factor in moving away from more competitive sport is the physiological impact. Many people cope with this very well, reflecting on past achievement and highly enjoyable, memorable incidents. They are proud of their past record but now look forward to new challenges. For others a more enforced move away from an activity they have loved may –often wrongly – lead to a personal opinion that the best of themselves is behind them. Frequently this is a wrong diagnosis, but can often reflect an individual's wider thoughts on getting older. What is apparent is that excessive internal reflection on what now is missing from day-to-day life can also be a catalyst to physical issues. Failure to see and appreciate continuing self-worth can trigger lack of personal care and motivation, such as a failure to eat well, drink too much alcohol or maintain important fitness associated with handling health in advancing age.

So what are some of the key factors to consider?

- 1) Watch for weight gain or a spreading girth and look to control this. Ballooning in size is to be avoided.
- 2) Keep a check on blood pressure. Small monitors are inexpensive and are commonly available from pharmacists.
- 3) Have a cholesterol check some four months after retiring from your strenuous sport and then have this checked at least annually to monitor any changes which may indicate that further changes in lifestyle or medication are appropriate.
- 4) If you are still concerned, request an ECG from your GP.

As humans we are all multi-talented in adapting to new challenges and for many who have been good at their sport they can turn their similar attention to be coached or mentored to achieve success and personal satisfaction in other fields. The self-discipline learned in a sport such as rowing or where vital teamwork is essential for joint success in sports like rugby and football is a major personal attribute which has lifelong advantages.

For professional sportspeople in areas such as both codes of rugby, football, cricket, horse racing and Olympic events there are arms of associations that are available to provide further assistance, but sometimes the efforts of amateurs can be just as pressurised. One further organisation that may be able to assist – usually on a group level – is Switch the Play info@switchtheplay.com.