

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century literary non-fiction

### Source B

This is an extract from a book published in London in 1838. The writer aims to give readers common-sense advice about looking after their health in their everyday lives. The book is written for men.

#### Observations on the Preservation of Health

How many *young* men there are in this city, who, being engaged in sedentary\* occupations the greater part of the day, in banking-houses, merchants' counting-houses, or lawyers' offices, imperatively need much muscular exercise to preserve their bodies in health and strength, yet, in sheer ignorance, give up almost the only opportunity they have of taking  
5 such exercise; and instead of walking to and from their places of business, get into an omnibus, and ride, for the express purpose of avoiding a little fatigue: whereas their elder brethren, who have risen an hour before them, may be seen walking, thereby availing themselves of the advantage of exercise. Many of these same persons, breathing during the whole day confined and impure air, emerge therefrom, and, with admirable sagacity\*,  
10 proceed straightaway into the still more impure air of a theatre, or other crowded place!

If individuals of this class knew their own interests, they would fix their habitations at a short distance (two or three miles) from town; and would regard as an indispensable appendage to their dwellings a plot of garden-ground. These preliminaries arranged, they would be early  
15 risers; they would cultivate their gardens, and, whenever the state of the weather permitted, would call in to their aid no other instruments of locomotion\* than those with which nature has furnished them. If such a plan as this were pursued, they would be able to resist the unhealthy influences to which they are in their daily pursuits exposed; and a blooming cheek and cheerful eye would be more common phenomena in the city of London than they at  
20 present are.

But, though the persons composing this useful and respectable class are in general neglectful of exercise, there are every year not a few victims from among them to excessive muscular exertion. Most of them enjoy once a-year a vacation of a few weeks – a resting  
25 from the cares and toils of business: and, as if to make up for their long confinement, many of these young persons determine to make the most of their short period of liberty, and set out on extensive pedestrian excursions. Ignorant or unmindful of the fact, that the muscles, for want of due exercise, become weak and incapable of powerful action; and that, to be beneficial, it is necessary that exercise should be proportioned to the strength of the organ –  
30 their object is, to accomplish the utmost of which their limbs are capable. Having heard that exercise is conducive to health, and knowing that, for the previous twelve months, they have had exceedingly little of it, they imagine their best plan is to take advantage of the present opportunity, and to lay up a stock of health for the twelve months to come. Unmindful of the monitions which their weary limbs afford, they march on to the end of their predetermined  
35 journey, consoling themselves for the pain they suffer by thinking that as it is caused by *exercise*, it will eventually promote their health. No opinion can be more mistaken: this excessive fatigue weakens the body to such a degree, as often to produce permanent debility\*, and lay the foundations of fatal disease

[...]

40 As closely connected with the subject of exercise, I shall append a few observations relating to those who lead sedentary lives.

45 Persons who are much occupied in writing, such as barristers, editors of newspapers, and those engaged in literary pursuits, will do well to have a high desk, at which they should stand to write whenever they are fatigued with sitting. This practice will be found extremely efficacious in preventing those desk-diseases which are incident to such occupations.

## Glossary

- \* sedentary – characterised by sitting down or being inactive
- \* sagacity – wisdom; showing good judgement
- \* locomotion – the act or power of moving from place to place
- \* debility – physical weakness, especially as a result of illness

This extract is from J. H. Curtis, *Observations on the Preservation of Health in Infancy, Youth, Manhood and Age* (1838), pages 75-8, and the full text of the third edition can be found online at <https://archive.org/details/b29339819>

This resource is brought to you by the Diseases of Modern Life project at the University of Oxford, which is supported by the [European Research Council](#) under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013) under Grant Agreement Number 340121.