

Here's health

Is this really good for you?

Richard Askwith, a fell-runner himself, describes the health benefits of running up hill and down dale

How far and how long should runners keep on running? Is there an age when it is time to put away the spikes and make do with memories of past glories? If you are a fell-runner, the answer is that there is no retirement age: you run until you stop enjoying it – which for some people can be a very long time indeed.

If you need proof, consider the World Masters Mountain Running Championships, which will be held in September on the treacherous slopes of Skiddaw and Lonscale Fell, the steep green mountains that overhang Keswick in Cumbria. Runners – who will race between six to eight miles on uneven paths and rough, slippery open mountain sides – have to be over 40, and many will be in their fifties, sixties or even over 70.

Alex Menary, 72, from Darlington, has an outside chance of a medal in the Over-70s category. A retired physicist, he began fell-running when he was 40 and for more than three decades was a "pull-back-when-it-starts-to-hurt sort of runner". He attributes the fact that he is still running today partly to luck, partly to the fact that he hasn't been flogging himself to death and partly to his continuing appreciation

that to run in wild, mountainous places is "a rare and precious privilege".

For the 2005 championships, however, he says "I have gone completely silly – quite unlike me really. I am going to bust a gut training." So far, it seems to be doing him nothing but good, not least because the resulting fitness is "enabling" in other areas of his life. "My wife and I do a lot of ballroom dancing, and the fitness helps there, too. It has also got me back to serious cycle touring. And we agree it's great for the sex life."

Further evidence comes from Duncan Overton, a former RAF training officer. Duncan is 57 and has a dodgy heart. Since surgery three years ago he has performed his mountain heroics with a pacemaker. Prudent? Perhaps not. But after his operation, "I got a bit angry with

I suffer many more bruises, grazes and sprains than is generally considered respectable for a mature adult



Askwith says none of his fell-running prangs has been life-threatening

Manchester University, "This is what the older body *should* be able to do." Unfortunately, she adds, "for some older people, a walk to the shops or climbing the stairs is an Olympian feat. But the good news is that it is never too late to increase fitness. One research trial showed that 90-year-olds in a residential setting could increase significantly their strength in a 12-week programme".

For those who are thinking of taking up fell-running, the key things to remember, according to Bob Laventure, are: "Get yourself checked over by your GP first. Prepare properly. Get proper expert advice. And start slowly."

"Obviously there's a greater risk of traumatic injury with fell-running than with running on roads or tracks," says Wendy Dodds, a 52-year-old rheumatologist from MIlnthorpe in Cumbria, a former doctor for the British Olympic squad. "But if you can avoid that, or recover from that, the incidence of repetitive strain injury is considerably less, so people keep going longer. There's also evidence that some kinds of stamina improve with age."

Wendy has twice been English women's Over-50s champion and has a good chance of winning the world title. But that's not why she does it. "I'm a mountain person rather than an athlete. If I'm still able to go out in 20 years' time and run in the hills – that's what I really aspire to."

World Masters championships are on September 10-11; see www.mountainrunningkeswick.org.uk for details. Richard Askwith is author of Feet in the Clouds: A Tale of Fell-Running and Obsession. A new edition is to be published by Aurum Press in June, price £8.99