A strange new world

The new coronavirus may be upending our lives, but we aren’t helpless against it

HARD times lie ahead. Not only do we all have to contend with the threat of covid-19 itself, and its economic fallout, but as nations lock down movement outside our homes, there are extra mental pressures to cope with too.

Fortunately, there are constructive things we can do. Our individual actions can slow the spread of the virus. We can help our neighbours to get through this. We can reach out electronically to support others. Such actions may help us develop a new sense of togetherness, and that will help.

There is something else, though, that we can do to improve both our physical and mental resilience: exercise. As we report on page 44, exercise is a sure-fire route to a stronger immune system.

This isn’t your typical well-being advice, issued alongside adjuncts to eat and sleep well. This is grounded in the cutting-edge science behind the idea that our immune system has an age that doesn’t necessarily match our body’s count in years. As we discuss, exercise is just one part of what we can do to reduce our immune age and strengthen our body’s defences against disease.

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Elsewhere in this issue, we look at the race to identify and test drugs that might treat covid-19 (page 8). Caution is needed: many celebratory reports and announcements are premature, and we are still without a drug that can help those who are seriously ill.

We also analyse the scientific advice that informed the UK government’s coronavirus strategy (page 9), which until Monday night was notably different from the line many other countries were taking, and report on studies showing that the virus causes negligible symptoms in many of those who have it. Strangely, infectiousness seems to peak before the onset of noticeable symptoms (page 10).

In the longer term, the question of immunity is going to be a central one (page 10). Will we be immune to the covid-19 virus if we get and recover from the illness or are we looking at wave after wave of infection? Despite the huge amount of science under way, there are many questions still in urgent need of answers.