

Introduction

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This support pack contains the following materials:

- the article that you can listen to in the podcast
- an optional comprehension activity based on the article
- links to other activities on the LearnEnglish website on this theme (Scotland).

Read the article

Scotland: The Sick Man of Europe

by Craig Duncan

We Scots get a bad press for our lifestyles, to say the least. This month Jack McConnell, First Minister of the Scottish Parliament, called us “one of the most unhealthy countries in Europe,” with a culture of “lack of exercise, drugs abuse, excessive drinking and over-eating.”

Traditionally, political leaders at least try to say nice things about the people who elected them, so McConnell’s outburst might seem a little surprising. What might be more surprising is that very few people disagreed with his attack. Scotland has long been called “the sick man of Europe”: our health statistics are quite shocking. Last year we finally shook off the dubious record of having the highest number of cancer deaths per capita in Western Europe, but we’re still near the top of table for coronary heart disease. Glasgow, Scotland’s largest city, has the UK’s lowest life expectancy and remains the only part of the UK where the average man does not live to be 70. Overall, people live for a shorter time in Scotland than in the rest of the UK. Politicians, doctors and statisticians are generally in agreement about the causes of all this: cigarettes, alcohol and fatty foods.

A number of new initiatives are now being tried to tackle these problems. For one, the Scottish Parliament proposes banning smoking in all Scottish pubs, clubs and restaurants, starting in 2006. Similar bans were recently introduced in both New York and Ireland; in both cases it’s too early to see if they will be effective, but they have certainly increased the number of people standing outside pubs, clubs and restaurants. Some people have suggested it’s a little ironic to offer us the chance to poison our livers in a smoke-free environment.

There is a great deal of concern in Britain as a whole about “binge drinking”, or drinking large amounts of alcohol in short periods. Our biggest brewing company, Scottish & Newcastle, has begun putting health warnings on its products, advising us that “responsible drinkers don’t exceed 4 daily units (men) and 3 units (women).” The average pint of lager contains approximately 2.3 units of alcohol. It’s only fair to point out that Scottish & Newcastle has also spent recent years promoting the consumption of stronger lagers with higher alcohol content. Meanwhile, the drinks industry as a whole has launched a new website, www.drinkaware.co.uk, with the aim of “ensuring that people who choose to drink alcohol can understand fully the responsible drinking message, and can make well-informed choices as a result.”



But does the problem really lie in our inability to understand the “message” about health? Not according to a 2001 survey of consumer attitudes conducted by the Food Standards Agency Scotland. This survey found that, while 48% of

Scots were fully aware of what constituted a healthy diet, only 23% actually ate healthily – the rest were “unable or unwilling to bridge the gap between awareness and actual behaviour”. The survey concluded that giving dire warnings about health simply does not work. People understand the theory, but can’t or won’t translate it into practice.

So, how can we persuade this rather unhealthy nation to give up their cigarettes, alcohol and fried food? Personally, I have no idea. But I

should admit that, as I wrote this, I smoked two cigarettes and drank one cup of sweet, milky tea. My dinner tonight will be a healthy vegetable dish, but today’s lunch was most certainly fried. I checked my last Saturday night’s alcohol consumption on the “Drinkaware” website, and I’m afraid to say I wasn’t a responsible drinker.

Evidently I’m a living stereotype. I’m one of the at least 25% of Scots who are fully aware of what a healthy lifestyle is, but can’t “bridge the gap between awareness and actual behaviour.”

After reading

Exercise 1

For each of the following 8 questions, decide if it is True or False:

1. The First Minister of the Scottish Parliament thinks Scots eat and drink too much.
2. Scottish people are more likely to die of cancer than anyone else in Western Europe.
3. Smoking is now banned in Scottish pubs.
4. Glasgow is the biggest city in Britain.
5. You can’t smoke in pubs in Ireland.
6. The author of this article lives a healthy lifestyle.
7. The author of this article puts sugar in his tea.
8. The health warnings now appearing on some Scottish lagers suggest that drinking two pints of lager in one night is irresponsible.

More activities on this topic

You’ll find links to all the following activities connected to the theme of Scotland at:
<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-central-themes-scotland.htm>

- **UK Culture:** in this issue we look at Scotland, which is the UK’s most northern country and has around 790 islands off its coasts – 130 of which have people living on them. Scotland is well known for its stunning landscapes, beautiful beaches and lochs, which are fresh water lakes.
- **Word games:** There are 2 word games available: **Scottish icons**. Match the names of things that are typical to Scotland to descriptions of them, and **Bagpipe jokes**. Match the questions to the answers of 5 jokes about bagpipes.
- **Poem: Address to the Haggis** This famous poem by the great Scottish poet Robert Burns is regularly recited during celebrations throughout the world, whenever Haggis makes an appearance on the menu.
- **Trivia:** Everything you (n)ever wanted to know about Scotland.
- There is also a Scotland-related cartoon, a poll, and some carefully selected external links.

Answers to comprehension activity: 1. True (T); 2. False (F); 3. F; 4. F; 5. T; 6. F; 7. T; 8. T