A s with so many other things, jogging started out as a fad, only to become an all-too-familiar activity the world over. Fitness clubs picked up the message and started successfully spreading the gospel of healthy lifestyles to the extent that even the language-conscious French saw fit to introduce the English word "fitness" into their everyday usage. All of a sudden, marathons as far apart as Rio and Moscow and a whole host of other less strenuous runs became newsworthy and popular. There is even an international organization called World Runners, with branches in different countries. WHO itself sponsors an annual health run (see pages 16–17).

Smokers are on the run, too, although in a different way. Apart from the much-publicised health hazards, including "passive smoking," this increasingly unfashionable activity is slowly but surely becoming socially unacceptable in more and more situations - or at least is silently frowned upon. More and more airlines ban smoking on their internal flights, following Aeroflot's bold move which initiated a policy of non-smoking flights in 1978 throughout the vast territory of the USSR.

By declaring its premises at the Geneva headquarters smoke-free, WHO has successfully proved that a non-smoking policy works in a large international organization, and that even diehard addicts may accept unconditional surrender.

The general climate - at least in the industrialized "North" - seems just right for these changes. Take the film industry; two or three decades ago film characters were habitually to be seen lighting up one cigarette after another on the smoke-filled sets. Today, to put it in a nutshell - "Winners Don't Smoke."

But tobacco companies are far from being idle and fatalistic. With dogged determination to stop the landslide in their traditional markets, they have come up with new and sophisticated ways of establishing brand-names with the public by sponsoring art festivals and sports events. Marketing craftily blends fine art work with the latest know-how in behavioural science, and brings to the potential consumer not merely a cut-and-dried tobacco leaf, but a powerful image loaded with psychological innuendo.

But it is the developing "South" that faces the real onslaught of aggressive tobacco advertising, masterminded by the international tobacco barons, eager to recruit new legions of nicotine addicts. The sad irony is that, for a number of developing countries' economies, tobacco crops mean a source of desperately-needed and otherwise unavailable hard-currency revenue. It is too easy to forget that this policy backfires with gigantic human and economic losses.

According to WHO's estimates, about two and a half million people die every year from the diseases caused by tobacco. Millions more are also incapacitated and unable to work. The fundamental truth about tobacco is that, should it be introduced today as a new product, it would never stand a chance of passing established national or international safety standards.

Another "socially acceptable" drug is undergoing evaluation, at least in the Northern hemisphere: alcohol. Thanks to the media's focus on the dangers and tragedies of drinking and driving as well as to the growing public awareness of the links between lifestyle and health, we are beginning to see hopeful signs that people are reconsidering their traditional attitudes towards alcohol. Soft drinks, mineral water and innocuous beverages are steadily gaining ground, pushing "hard stuff" like whisky or vodka from the high tables of annual statistics. But again, as with smoking, the overall picture is extremely patchy and uneven.

While the general statistical trend in the industrialised "North," considerably helped along by the Soviet Union's massive anti-drinking campaign, is taking a spectacular dive, alcohol consumption in many countries of the developing "South" has shot sky-high in recent decades. And this trend continues.

Different cultures and lifestyles today create a gigantic tapestry - subsistence farming in the jungles of New Guinea is worlds apart from the jungles of cooperative take-overs in New York. But both are, albeit for widely different reasons, stressful societies. Stress, that hard-to-catch gremlin of today's psychiatry, permeates in one shape or another all layers of society with ever increasing frequency and duration.

Traumatic events, anxiety, loneliness, urbanisation, work-related stress, migration: all these are not only stressful but also lead to increased blood pressure, cardiovascular diseases, chronic disorders. High blood pressure already rides high in developing countries; every fifth adult in Latin America suffers from it.

Cardiovascular diseases, traditionally considered as a self-induced plague of the industrialised societies, are reaching epidemic proportions in the developing world where they are already the cause of every fifth death. Atherosclerosis, which is sometimes referred to as the "unseen killer," is a condition in which fatty and fibrous material builds up in the inner walls of the body's arteries. Paclogged arteries are dangerous because they cut down the flow of blood. As a result arteries become not only narrower, but less elastic. A balanced diet low in saturated fat, with plenty of natural carbohydrates such as...
vegetables, fruits, bread and other cereal products, will go a long way towards keeping your arteries clean. By contrast, foods with a high saturated fat content include egg yolks, butter, cheese, coconut oil, hard fat on meats, liver, kidney, processed meats such as sausages, and hard margarines. Commercially prepared cakes, chocolates and biscuits also contain saturated fat in a non-visible form.

Regular exercise is the other proven way of prolonging healthy life. Unfortunately, the majority of us still prefer to watch sports on the television rather than physically participate in whatever is available. Even in the health-conscious United States, every fourth citizen is overweight. Here is a useful tip — try to keep your weight within five kilos of "normal" and you'll be in good shape.

Make an effort and prove to yourself that you can take charge of your life now, without putting it on the backburner of an annual New Year's Resolution. Spare your relatives the sad euphemism deployed by one physician in a large American hospital: "He did not achieve his wellness potential...

Sausage-eating used to be popular in some countries in past years. Today, most people know that too much fatty meat clogs the arteries and produces atherosclerosis. Photo WHO/P. Almasy

Drinking and driving — a bad mix

Every year, more than 1,200 men, women and children die on the roads of the United Kingdom in traffic accidents caused by alcohol abuse — about one fifth of the annual road death toll. If we picture a similar figure — often more, sometimes less — in every country of the world, we have a horrifying picture of people killed and maimed by misuse of a drug.

Many accidents are caused by drunken pedestrians, but all too often the culprit is the motorist who has drunk more than a safe limit — and some experts in road accidents would say there is no safe limit for drivers who drink. Most countries set the level at no more than one part of alcohol in 1,000 parts of blood — written as 1.0 per mill.

Each country tackles the "drunk-driving" problem in different ways. In New South Wales, Australia, drivers are given a breath test by police at least once a year. Highly visible "booze buses" are parked alongside the main road, and police wave down vehicles at random and check their breath. The test takes only 30 seconds, and the object is not so much to catch offenders as to deter potential offenders. The result has been to make a bigger reduction in the death toll on New South Wales roads than that which followed the introduction of compulsory seat-belts.

In Sweden, random breath tests cut the number of deaths attributed to drinking and driving by between 30 and 50 per cent. Finland too was able to halve the drunk-driving rate by increasing tests thirtyfold.

According to the London-based Observer newspaper, "the evidence from Finland, New Zealand, the United States and other countries where random breath testing is already in force is that by far the most effective deterrent against drivers who drink and drive is to increase public fears of being caught by highly visible check-points."

The newspapers criticised the United Kingdom authorities for not having much more intensive breath tests as a matter of course. Whether drunk drivers are caught — and how severely they are punished if they are caught — depends heavily on the county in which the offence occurs. In 1986, only just over 15 per cent of drivers and motorcyclists involved in an accident were asked to take a breath test. Some of the resistance to random tests by the police stems from the major motoring organisations, who claim that such tests infringe civil liberties.

The statistics from countries all round the world suggest that deaths on the road caused by alcohol are tragically high. And that the concerned authorities could do well to emulate those in New South Wales, whose roadside posters warn: "How will it be when you take the test? Will you be under 0.5 per mill — or under arrest?"

Health advocacy and promotion have helped to make the climate ripe for beneficial change in many parts of the world. Graffiti on a wall in Geneva say "No" to drug abuse. Photo WHO/V. Abramov

Smoking, a life-endangering habit which obliges non-smokers to breathe unhealthy air, is becoming more and more unfashionable. Photo WHO/Zalar