True influence cannot be measured in likes and followers. It’s worth more than #ads and double taps. That’s why this list is different: you’ll find true change-makers, from life-saving scientists to tech innovators. These are the people making a difference to your life right now, whether you realise it or not.
HEALTH & FITNESS INFLUENCERS 2020

01. Kamal Patel
Director of examine.com, opposer of nutritional “fake news”

James Patel’s Atomic Habits has sold more than a million copies, and the odds are that you’ll find one at your workplace or gym. Ten million visitors browse his website each year, and more than 650,000 people subscribe to his weekly “3-2-1” newsletter. He’s a “wannabe celebrity”, and the haphazard way in which they’re published each year – and the lack of a comprehensive source of unbiased nutritional information. Given the thousands of game-changing studies published each year – and the haphazard way in which they’re reported by the media – how could the average person keep up? They need help from experts (and bought the domain name for $41,000.)

A nalysis of research papers might not be many people’s idea of a hobby. But it’s Kamal Patel’s – as well as his profession. Patel and his examine.com co-founder, Sol Orwell, met after discovering that they were both sufferers of the same rare and painful joint condition, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, and were searching for ways to manage it.

At the time, Patel was researching vitamin D at the US Institute of Medicine. “I was also a wannabe powerlifter”, he says, “so I was tweaking my diet a lot.” Both men were dismayed by the lack of a comprehensive source of unbiased nutritional information. Given the thousands of game-changing studies published each year – and the haphazard way in which they’re reported by the media – how could the average person keep up? They needed help from experts.

The area of research on which Patel is currently most frequently trodden is gut health. “There used to be this concept that when you eat something, it’s just integrated into your body.” He explains. “But now, we know that everybody’s gut is different and reacts very differently to foods. That’s why people sometimes say a certain diet didn’t work for them.” But more important than what he does know is his willingness to recognise what he doesn’t. “We know that we’re fallible. We make mistakes. So, if anyone catches anything, please let us know.”

02. James Clear
Best-selling self-help author, forger of good habits

One of the most popular trends in self-help is the authorised guidebook. But what does the author of Atomic Habits think of the genre? “It’s a good thing he didn’t go with his gut…” In the near future, he hopes we’ll be able to “read” our bacteria like we read through Google Translate and use that info to build personalised medicines and diet plans.

03. Adrian Hill
Vaccine maker at Oxford University, COVID-19 combatant

Adrian Hill is currently most frequently in the news for his work on the Oxford vaccine. But what does he think about the whole hype around vaccines? “We have also had hundreds of very elite athletes reach out to us,” says Wilks. “He won’t name names but reveals: “’Soccer is one of the big ones.’”

James Wilks is a former mixed martial artist, with black belts in taekwondo, kickboxing and Brazilian jiu-jitsu, there was a time when Wilks believed that eating animal protein at every meal was integral to his health and performance. That’s backwaters thinking,” he says now. “If you really think you need meat to build muscle, that’s just so old-fashioned.”

04. Mark Twight
Founder of cult fitness facility Gym Jones, anti-influencer

When director Zack Snyder first visited gym Jones (a name riffing on Twight’s charisma and hard-core methods), he was mentioned with respect. His work has since reinvented himself as a mind transformation specialist and teaches his philosophy of effort to followers via his Project Mayhem-like Nofpropog Media.

05. Rob Knight
Director of the Center for Microbiome Innovation, gut-health guru

If your shopping basket has been full of kefir, pickles and kombucha in recent years, you have one man to credit. When New Zealander Rob Knight was invited to collaborate on a project investigating the link between gut bacteria and bodyweight, he was initially sceptical. His work has since tied our microbiomes to everything from obesity and immune health to anxiety (if a good thing he didn’t go with his gut…” In the near future, he hopes we’ll be able to “read” our bacteria like we read through Google Translate and use that info to build personalised medicines and diet plans.

06. James Wilks
Pro MMA fighter, producer of The Game Changers, maker of vegans

V eganism used to have an image problem. Or, more specifically, vegan men who have often been unfairly characterised as oversensitive and underfed. With his documentary The Game Changers – which was executive-produced by James Cameron, among others – Wilks ripped this idea up at its roots, arguing not only that meat is expendable in the quest for strength, but that a plant-based diet is actually superior for athletes of all disciplines. “The response has been incredible,” says Wilks. “Within a week of the film hitting Netflix, the interest in plant-based eating more than tripled worldwide, according to Google Trends metrics.” Among those said to have switched up their diets after watching the film are actor Dolph Lundgren, strongman Harlott Bjorransson and the CEO of sausage roll purveyor Greggs, Roger Whiteside.
07. Dwayne Johnson
Actor, producer, wrestler and polymath, the Rock

When polls showed that the wrestler-turned-actor Dwayne Johnson would beat Donald Trump (with a People’s Elbow, I might add), it was inevitable that the state would do everything for the state to stay healthy. Mount Rushmore would announce its campaign for 2020. That 2017 Saturday Night Live skit seems less like a joke now with Johnson calling impassioned for real leadership to his 189-million-strong Instagram base, while Joe Rogan pleads: “C’mon, leadership to his 189-million—now with Johnson calling...

08. Chris Whitty
Chief medical officer for England, voice of reason

With the UK suffering more coronavirus deaths than any other European country (second only to the United States as we write this), the government has been criticised for its confused and oblique messaging (“Don’t go outside! But do go to work.”). England’s cautious and plain-speaking chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, has proved a reassuring presence at Downing Street press briefings. Whitty and his colleagues have frequently opposed plans to lower the UK’s threat level and defended care home staff. At least someone’s alert.

09. John Berardi
Author, founder of Precision Nutrition, no-nonsense educator

“John has literally revolutionised the way most of us think about nutrition,” wrote bodybuilding website T-Nation in 2002 – the year before the “Large Professor” co-founded the hugely respected online coaching company Precision Nutrition. With clients from Nike to Equinox, Olympic gold medalists to UFC champ Georges St-Pierre, Precision Nutrition has helped more than 100,000 people eat their goals, and qualified almost as many coaches to give scientifically sound food advice. Having taught at recognised learning institutions, Berardi has established the Change Maker Academy to turn coaches into, well, him.

10. Robin Carhart-Harris
Brain researcher, scientific psychonaut

“Obtaining magic mushrooms in the UK is a realistic goal and it could be coming sooner than we think,” Robin Carhart-Harris told MH in 2018. We might not be there yet, but the doc’s predictions have proved prophetic. The years since have seen the opening of Imperial College London’s multimillion-pound Centre for Psychedic Research, headed by Carhart-Harris, where studies comparing psilocybin to traditional antidepressants show potentially game-changing results. He has also researched LSD and MDMA. Even Gwyneth Paltrow is on board – though don’t let that put you off.

11. Tony Bignell
Nike’s VP of footwear innovation, creator of the world’s fastest trainer

The top-three marathon men at the 2016 Rio Olympics were all Nike Zoom Vaporfly guys. In 2017, Eliud Kipchoge ran two-and-a-half minutes faster than the men’s world record of 2:02:57 in the Vaporfly Elite, albeit unofficially. In 2018, he officially smashed the record by 78 seconds in the Vaporfly 4% – that figure being its scarcely believable improvement to the wearer’s running economy. And in 2019, Kipchoge finally (unofficially) broke two hours by 20 seconds in… What are those? Are they legal? Paula Radcliffe’s ‘16-year women’s marathon world record (2:15:25) is now a household name. The 32 men in the UK every day, three times more than women lost 32 men in the UK every day, two hours by 20 seconds in 2019. Alphafly Next%, launched to the rest of us in June, complies with the sole thickness limit of 40mm. It contains the one permitted carbon plate, not the rumoured three. It’s not ‘spring-loaded’. The confusion, Bignell says, is partly because Nike files countless patents for lots of prototypes. Other manufacturers boast similar technologies. But it’s Bignell and his team who, with “hundreds and hundreds” of tweaks and feedback from Kipchoge and co, have nailed the blend. Running shoes typically lose 30-40% of the wearer’s energy. If one hand, it’s a vote of confidence that they returned more than 100%, that we feel like we’re making a difference and that’s what we’re trying to do,” says Bignell. “But on the other hand, it is a little bit limiting.”

World Athletics’ tighter footwear restrictions in January ostensibly took aim at Kipchoge’s sub-two platform moon boots, with their alien forefoot foam pods. But the Alphafly Next%, launched to the rest of us in June, complies with the sole thickness limit of 40mm. It contains the one permitted carbon plate, not the rumoured three. It’s not ‘spring-loaded’. The confusion, Bignell says, is partly because Nike files countless patents for lots of prototypes. Other manufacturers boast similar technologies. But it’s Bignell and his team who, with “hundreds and hundreds” of tweaks and feedback from Kipchoge and co, have nailed the blend. Running shoes typically lose 30-40% of the wearer’s energy. If one hand, it’s a vote of confidence that they returned more than 100%, that would be cheating to Bignell. “We’re just making them more efficient.”

12. Andy Puddicombe
Founder of meditation app Headspace, purveyor of peace of mind

Headspace, which has soon reach his nirvana of 54 million users. With its effectiveness mounting, Puddicombe will soon reach his nirvana of doctors dispensing it.

13. Johann de Bono
Regius Professor of Cancer Research, life-extender

Prostate cancer now kills 32 men in the UK every day, even more than women lost to breast cancer. De Bono – based at London’s Institute of Cancer Research and Royal Marsden – is on a mission to reduce that statistic. He has been dubbed one of the world’s most influential scientific minds by Reuters, having developed more than 100 cancer drugs, including olaparib, which is due to become the first gene-targeted precision medicine for prostate cancer. All you need to know is that he has improved both patients’ longevity and quality of life. “I know men today who would be dead if I hadn’t done this work,” he says.
Stephen Manderson
AKA rapper
Professor Green, suicide-prevention campaigner

In 2011, long before male mental health became a major media talking point, Stephen Manderson released a song addressing his father’s death by suicide. “Read All About It,” in which he proclaimed, “pretending everything is all right when it ain’t really isn’t working.” It’s a statement that he has stood by — and acted on. Alongside his role as the patron of the leading mental health charity Calm, he has made BBC documentaries on subjects such as suicide, poverty and homelessness, and was an early supporter of Men’s Health’s campaign # MellTheGap.

**16. Cory Wharton-Malcolm**
Track Mafia founder and Nike coach, champion of inclusive fitness

Track Mafia isn’t a running club – it’s a community. “People don’t just come for the exercise. They come for friendship,” says founder Cory Wharton-Malcolm. “Beezy” to his friends and followers. At Track Mafia, you’ll meet chefs, illustrators, hospital workers, CEOs, “TL” workers. Everyone has a common purpose.” On Thursday nights at Paddington Rec’s athletics track, there is no hierarchy. It’s free, and novices train alongside pros. Groups such as Track Mafia and Run Dem Crew, for which Wharton-Malcolm has also worked, have changed the face of recreational running. It’s been said that the sport attracts a narrow demographic — slim, middle class, white. These crews are the antipode: a home for those who don’t fit the profile, but take their running no less seriously. When Wharton-Malcolm took up running in preparation for joining the 2007 London Marathon, he could barely jog to the bottom of his road without gasping out. “My friends laughed and said, ‘You’re fat, you smoke, you eat kebabs. How do you plan to do this?’” They’re probably not laughing now. Today, as well as fronting Track Mafia, Wharton-Malcolm is a head coach (and voice) for the Nike Run Club app, which during lockdown became the fourth most popular app in the UK. He has acted as a speaker in parliament and Buckingham Palace, talking about how sports can be used to engage young people, strengthen communities and reduce antisocial behaviour. Championing inclusivity remains his MO, including opening up new pathways into top-tier jobs. “I think a lot of organisations feel, ‘If this person wasn’t taught the way I was taught, then they’re not for us. We’ll have to spend too much time showing them how to do things our way.’ But don’t you want to learn how to do things their way, too?”

**17. Dorian Yates**
Six-time Mr Olympia, unlikely icon of holistic health

Yates swapped steroids and growth hormone for marijuana and ayahuasca. Into meditation and yoga in a big way; he’s become an unlikely advocate for developing spirituality as well as musculature.

**18. Justin “JC” Coghlan**
Co-founder of Movember, the man who made fundraising fun

Like many of the best ideas, the concept for Movember was dreamed up in a pub. Inspired by the work they had seen women doing to raise funds for breast cancer, Travis Garone and Luke Slattery felt that men should be taking similar action on behalf of their own well-being. So, they challenged 30 of their mates to grow a (sponsored) moustache. The following year, they registered as a company and gave Justin “JC” Coghlan a role as campaign manager. Their first big campaign was titled Give Prostate Cancer a Kick in the Arse. “We were young men,” says JC. “We got hit hard by the media at the start. We had straight-laced campaigns; we had to get men having fun together.” But people aren’t looking for a solution. They’re looking for support.”
Ben Francis

Founder of activewear brand Gymshark, pioneer of influencer marketing

“F**k standing on the sideline. F**k injustice. F**k racism.” Where some brands virtue-signalled vaguely in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, Gymshark spoke out, donating $155,000 to Black Lives Matter and committing to driving change via its channels. “A ‘red thread’ of community runs through the UK sportswear company, says founder Ben Francis, fresh of face at 28. ‘We’re super-inclusive, super-caring, super-transparent.’ And unlike the older, clunkier competitors that it’s circling, Gymshark has picked up the baton to reliably chart a more cutting edge of research into the brain’s relationship with oxygen for more than 20 years. Most important is his research into concussion. His findings prove that repeated blows to the head in rugby reduce the brain’s ability to use oxygen and increases the risk of degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer’s. Crucially, people are listening: his impact is now global. Last year’s World Cup was the first to feature the High Tackle Sanction Framework, and the overall concussion incidence decreased by 28%.

Dana White

UFC president, pandemic-era sports visionary

The ink was dry on the success story of the UFC: a fresh show bought by White and the Fertitta brothers for $12m that grew into a global force sold to Endeavor Group Holdings for $4bn. Then a certain pandemic cancelled sport. White reacted quickly, with spectator-free fight cards making the UFC the first major North-American pro sport to resume. His next move is “Fight Island” in Abu Dhabi, which will operate as a COVID-19 safe zone for fighters and their coaches to live, train and compete. The sport-starved world will be watching.

Chris Mosier

Mould-breaking sprint duathlete, US Olympic reformer

There’s nothing more influential in health than our NHS. We have known for years that this giant, life-saving machine is in peril; Kay’s genius has been in humanising it. His memoir, This Is Going to Hurt, shifted our focus to the overworked, underpaid people propelling it up. It ignited a conversation that exploded in response to COVID-19 and resulted in 400,000 people signing up to the NHS “volunteer army” in 48 hours. His latest book, Dear NHS: 100 Stories to Say Thank You, is a continuation of this story and seeds hope that, in his words, “the NHS will never again be taken for granted.” Not by the British public, not by the media and, most importantly, not by the politicians.

Adam Kay

Comedian and best-selling author, defender of the NHS

For trans inclusion in sport

Activism wasn’t his intention, but with guidelines for transgender people in sport still politically charged, he has picked up the baton to qualify for the Olympic Games. His iconic “Body Issue” and, this year, the first transgender athlete to represent the US in international competition, the first to appear in ESPN’s iconic ‘Body Issue’ and, this year, he became the first to qualify for the Olympic trials in the gender category with which he identifies. Activism wasn’t his intention, but with guidelines for transgender people in sport still politically charged, he has picked up the baton and run/cycled it. His website, transathletics.com, tracks and opposes discriminatory policies.