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Physician Focus Special: Walk This Way - Simple Form of Exercise Has Considerable Benefits

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By Joseph P. Kannam, M.D.



We know that walking is a common form of exercise and a simple means of transportation. But most of us don't realize the considerable health benefits to be gained if we step up and make walking part of our daily routine.

Studies show that the lifestyles of Americans are becoming increasingly sedentary, dramatically raising the risk of obesity, heart disease, and related health problems.

As many as 250,000 deaths each year in the United States are attributed to a lack of regular exercise, and less than one-third of Americans meet the Surgeon General's minimal recommendation for activity—preferably 30 minutes of moderate-intensity activity every day.

Walking, with the highest stick-with-it rate of any form of exercise, is an easy, fun, and affordable activity that improves cardiovascular health, reduces the risk of heart disease, lowers cholesterol and blood pressure, and increases energy. In addition, walking can strengthen bones, bolster the immune system, fight depression, and clear your mind.

Step It Up

Walking at a brisk speed is recommended, since studies show a direct correlation between gait speed and life span. A recent study by the American Medical Association found that only 19 percent of the slowest-walking, 75-year-old men lived for 10 more years compared to 87 percent of the fastest-walking men. Only 35 percent of the slowest-walking, 75-year-old women made it to their 85th birthday compared to 91 percent of the fastest walkers.



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In fact, walking briskly can lower your risk of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes just as much as running, according to a recent study by the American Heart Association. A good way to increase speed and exercise with friends is to power walk, which typically ranges in pace from 4.5 to 5.5 miles per hour.

But what if conditions such as angina, arthritis, and bad balance get in the way? In these instances, alternative methods can help maximize the benefits of walking. For example, accessories like hiking poles (similar to ski poles but designed for walking) permit upright walking and increase the cardiovascular workload. Wearing ankle weights can also increase energy expenditure as well as heart rate and training intensity. Of course, an essential accessory is a good pair of sneakers or running shoes, which can prevent discomfort and facilitate longer walks.

Keep on Track

A variety of methods can help you track your progress, improve habits, and maintain a healthy routine. Stroll with pets and/or friends. Join a walking club. Discover pleasant routes around your home or workplace. And if the weather is bad, go to the mall.

Even a moderate walking routine can be beneficial for your head as well as your heart. According to a recent study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, older adults who walk briskly just three times per week can boost their brainpower and reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease.

So, how can you get started? A good way to build stamina is to begin at a slow pace, walk in intervals, and gradually increase your speed and distance. At first, set a pace of about 3 miles per hour and walk for 10 minutes. After ramping up, walk for 30 minutes a day at least five days a week.

Here's the takeaway for people of any age: If you don't work out regularly, for whatever reason, consider that there is an easy and beneficial way to improve your health: Take a walk. And if you feel you're having a hard time keeping up with more rigorous training, consider that walking may be just as beneficial as running. Walking is good for your heart,



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good for your mind, good for your social life, even good for the environment.

Joseph P. Kannam, M.D., is a cardiologist at the CardioVascular Institute at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center and chief of cardiology at the Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital – Needham, and Medical Director of the organization's Walking Club. Physician Focus is a public service of the Massachusetts Medical Society. Readers should use their own judgment when seeking medical care and consult with their physician for treatment. Send comments to PhysicianFocus@mms.org