

Walking for Health

Junita Pondaaga gives us the simple formula for making the most of our exercise ...

Walking, one of the fastest-growing activities in the United States, is the easiest and simplest form of exercise. It comes naturally in our daily life; you can do it anytime, anywhere. Walking can keep your body shape and control your weight. If done right, walking everyday can not only burn calories; it can prevent stress and strengthen your immune system. All of these benefits come with very little cost; all you need is some time and a good pair of walking shoes.

Stress

Walking reduces your stress. If you take a long brisk walk after a hectic day at school or work you can feel the difference. You feel refreshed, you have more energy and you feel better about yourself. There is a simple connection between walking and stress. When you exercise, the brain releases endorphins, a hormone that can suppress fatigue, reduce pain and produce relaxation.

Health

Another benefit of walking is disease prevention. Walking can prevent cardiovascular and coronary heart disease; reduce the risk of high blood pressure and a high cholesterol level (from all that junk food we eat), colon cancer, type-2 diabetes (non-insulin dependent) and osteoporosis (loss of bone mass leading to fractures). A simple way to reduce your chance of getting these diseases is by engaging in moderate physical activity everyday. A brisk walk - for 30 minutes every day - falls into that category. Dr. Dean Edell, a physician broadcaster who can cover medical issues for KGO, said that according to a new study published in the **New England Journal of Medicine**, simply walking several times a week is as effective as vigorous exercise in reducing a woman's risk of heart disease. That said, the health benefit easiest for people to see is an improvement of their immune system. If you have been walking on a regular basis, you'll begin to notice that you won't easily catch colds during the flu season, and you can better fight those allergies when spring comes along.

Weight Loss

Another good thing you can get from walking is a faster metabolism. You will digest food faster, and burn calories faster. A faster metabolism helps to prevent people from getting obese, and walkers usually lose weight. You can have more muscle and less fat in your body, giving you an improved body shape and self-image. Overall, you will gain wellness over your life span.

Tips on Walking

So by now you must be thinking, "Hey, walking is great. I can do it. In fact, I can do it now!" Let me give you some tips to "plus" (or add to the effectiveness of) your walk.

- Stand tall, relax your shoulders and tighten your abdominal muscles so that you can support your back (you don't want to have backache, do you?).
- Straighten your legs. If you do, you'll be using more muscles; and be gaining more strength and flexibility in your hips, knees and ankles.
- Bend your arms at a 90-degree angle, and swing them while you walk for an upper body workout. If you swing your arms fast, your legs will keep up with the pace and you will walk faster.
- Last, to avoid boredom, try different types of terrain. Walking on grass, sand and gravel burns more calories than walking on a track. Walking up and down the hill will challenge different muscles. Walking in water will also burn more calories; the deeper the water, the more calories you burn. And then there's Retrowalk, that's walking backwards to work your back, abdomen, and thigh muscles (use a smooth surface, such as a track, so you don't hurt yourself). Don't let bad weather stop you, an indoor shopping mall can be used (as long as you keep your wallet in your pocket).

For those of you who don't have time to exercise, don't feel discouraged. You can still get the benefits I mentioned above, you just have to change your lifestyle a little bit. Here's what you can do according a book called *Core Concepts of Health*, by Paul M. Insel and Walton T. Roth:

- Walk to the bank, post office or library whenever is possible.
- Take the stairs instead of the elevator or escalator.
- Park your car a few blocks away from your destination, and walk briskly from your car to your destination.
- When taking public transportation, get off one stop down the line and walk to your destination.
 - If you have a dog, give your dog a treat by taking him or her for a walk every evening after dinner.
 - Take study or work breaks to avoid sitting more than 30 minutes. Get up and walk around the library, your office, and your home; go up and down a flight of stairs.
 - Walk to visit your neighbors instead of calling them up on the phone. Go for a walk when you chat. That way you can socialize while you exercise.
 - Seize every opportunity to get up and walk around. Move more and sit less.

Shoes

One important thing you need before you start walking is a good pair of exercise shoes. You don't want to walk barefoot for two miles and have your feet hurt, right? Let me give you some tips for choosing the right footwear:

- Shop in the afternoon because your foot size increases during the day, and wear the kind of socks you're planning to wear with your shoes, so you can get a good fit.
- Try both the left and the right shoe (many people have different size feet). Walk around the store and see if the shoes are comfortable. Don't insist buying shoes you consider to be "your shoe size." Sizes vary from shoe manufacturer to shoe manufacturer.
- Don't be afraid to ask the sales person questions, they're there to help you.

Now you're set to go. Start slowly and work your way up. Don't forget to drink water while you exercise, especially in hot weather. Don't wait until you feel thirsty to drink. To avoid cramps and muscle soreness, stretch before and after you exercise. Enjoy the scenery around you and breath that fresh air, and you will be on your way to a healthier life.