4 Ways Walking is Good for You

Discover how this low-impact activity can improve both your physical and mental health

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Starting a regular walking program offers numerous health and fitness benefits!

Good for your heart: Walking regularly can help reduce high blood pressure and high cholesterol, both of which contribute to heart disease.

• According to the long-term Nurses' Health Study, which follows the habits and health of 72,000 female nurses, three hours of brisk walking each week (that's just 30 minutes per day) can lower a woman's risk of heart disease by 30% to 40%.

• A 2001 study published in Medicine & Science in Sports and Exercise found that sedentary women with high blood pressure reduced their systolic blood pressure and body mass by walking 9,700 steps per day at a self-selected pace for 24 weeks.

• Harvard researchers looked at 11,000 men and determined that one hour of regular, moderate exercise (equivalent to brisk walking), done five days a week, may cut a man's risk of stroke in half.

Strengthens bones and joints: Walking is easier on your joints than higher-impact activities like running or aerobics, but it still helps reduce your risk for osteoporosis and reduces your risk of falls.

• Consistent activity, like walking, reduces one's risk of hip fracture, according to a study of more than 30,000 men and women ages 20 to 93.

• A review of 24 studies on aerobic exercise and bone mineral density in women suggests that walking just 30 minutes per day a few times a week is enough to increase bone density by a moderate amount (about two percent) compared to non-exercisers. Walking was the preferred form of exercise by most participants.

Weight control: Walking may seem like a leisurely activity, but with the right intensity, it can elevate your heart rate and burn serious calories so you can reach and maintain a healthy weight.

• A study published in the International Journal of Obesity suggested that 30 minutes of walking on most days of the week may be as beneficial for weight loss as 60 minutes of walking (in combination with diet).

• Researchers from the Center for Human Nutrition at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center say that simply walking for 15 minutes (or about 2,000 steps) and eating a couple fewer bites of food can help you prevent future weight gain.

• Without changing diet, a review of pedometer-based walking programs found that participants who take 2,000 to 4,000 steps per day (that's about 1 to 2 miles) can still expect modest weight loss (about five pounds per year).

Benefits for the Mind: A long list of mental health benefits have been attributed to exercise, including reduced depression, better sleep, and more.

• Sedentary women who engaged in a walking program reported improved mental and emotional satisfaction and a decrease in stress, according to a Journal of Holistic Nursing article published in 2006.

• Women & Health published another study that measured 128 sedentary, ethnic-minority women. Researchers found that participants who walked more reported increases in positive mental health and well being.

• Another of 124 sedentary older adults found that those started walking for 45 minutes three times per week for six months performed substantially better on several cognitive tasks than those who did stretching or strengthening exercises. Researchers, whose study was published in Nature, think that their improved cardiorespiratory fitness increased blood flow to the brain, which helped improve brain function.

So what are you waiting for? Just start putting one foot in front of the other!