

Walking for good health

Physical activity does not have to be vigorous or done for long periods in order to improve your health. A 2007 study of inactive women found that even a low level of exercise – around 75 mins per week – improved participants' fitness levels significantly, when compared to a non-exercising group.

Walking is a suitable physical activity for most people. Regular walking can help you lose body fat, maintain a healthy weight, improve your fitness and reduce your risk of developing conditions such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis and some cancers.

Walking is low impact, requires minimal equipment, can be done at any time of day and can be performed at your own pace. You can get out and walk without worrying about some of the risks associated with other more vigorous forms of exercise. It's also a great form of physical activity for people who are overweight, elderly or those who haven't exercised in a long time.

Benefits of walking

You carry your own body weight when you walk. This is sometimes called 'weight bearing' exercise. Some of the benefits include:

- Increased cardiovascular and pulmonary (heart and lung) fitness
- Reduced risk of heart disease and stroke
- Improved management of conditions such as hypertension (high blood pressure), high cholesterol, joint and muscular pain or stiffness, and diabetes
- Stronger bones and improved balance
- Increased muscle strength and endurance
- Reduced body fat.

Walk for 30 minutes a day

To get the health benefits, try to walk for at least 30 minutes as briskly as you can most days of the week. 'Brisk' means that you can still talk but not sing, and you may be puffing slightly. Moderate activities such as walking pose little health risk but, if you have a medical condition, check with your doctor before starting any new exercise program of physical activity.

Build physical activity into your life

If it's too difficult to walk for 30 minutes at one time, do regular small bouts (10 minutes) three times per day and gradually build up to longer sessions. If your goal is to lose weight, you will need to do physical activity for longer than 30 minutes each day. You can achieve this by starting with smaller bouts of activity throughout the day and increasing these to sessions of more than 30 minutes as your fitness improves.

Physical activity built into a daily lifestyle plan is also one of the most effective ways to assist with weight loss and keep weight off once it's lost. Some suggestions to build walking into your daily routine include:

- Try taking the stairs instead of the lift (for at least part of the way).
- Get off public transport one stop earlier and walk to work or home.
- Do housework like vacuuming.
- Walk (don't drive) to the local shops.
- Walk the dog (or your neighbour's dog).

Walk regularly if you can

Try to make walking a routine – for example, try to walk at the same time each day. Remember, you use the same amount of energy no matter what time of day you walk, so do what is most convenient for you. You may find that asking someone to walk with you will help make it a regular activity. Some people find that keeping an 'activity diary or log' also makes it easier.

Wear a pedometer

A pedometer measures the number of steps you take. You can use it to measure your movement throughout a day and compare it to other days or to recommended amounts. This may motivate you to move more. The recommended number of steps accumulated per day to achieve health benefits is 10,000 steps or more.

Set a comfortable intensity

For most people, there is little difference in the amount of energy used by walking a kilometre or running a kilometre – it's just that walking takes longer. Plan to cover a set distance each day and monitor how long it takes you to walk this distance. As your fitness improves, you will be able to walk a longer distance and use more energy.

Walking fast burns more kilojoules per hour than walking slowly, but this doesn't mean you have to push yourself until you're breathless. Instead, pace yourself so that you can still talk. This simple rule of thumb enables you to walk safely within your target heart rate, which brings about health gains.

The body tends to get used to physical activity, so continue to increase your intensity as you are able and thus improve your fitness levels. You can increase the intensity of your walks by:

- Walking up hills
- Walking with hand weights
- Increasing your walking speed gradually by including some quick walking
- Increasing the distance you walk quickly before returning to a moderate walking pace
- Walking for longer.

Warming up and cooling down

The best way to warm up is to walk slowly. Start off each walk at a leisurely pace to give your muscles time to warm up, and then pick up the speed. Afterwards, gently stretch your leg muscles – particularly your calves and front and back thighs. Stretches should be held for about 20 seconds. If you feel any pain, ease off the stretch. Don't bounce or jolt, or you could overstretch muscle tissue and cause microscopic tears, which lead to muscle stiffness and tenderness.

It's best to dress lightly when you do physical activity. Dressing too warmly can increase sweating and build up body temperature, which can make you uncomfortable during a walk or possibly cause skin irritations. A gradual cool down will also prevent muscular stiffness and injury.

Footwear is important

Walking is a low cost and effective form of exercise. However, the wrong type of shoe or walking action can cause foot or shin pain, blisters and injuries to soft tissue. Make sure your shoes are comfortable, with appropriate heel and arch supports. Take light, easy steps and make sure your heel touches down before your toes. Whenever possible, walk on grass rather than concrete to help absorb the impact.

Make walking a pleasure

Some suggestions to help make regular walking a pleasurable form of physical activity include:

- Wear loose, comfortable clothing.
- Protect yourself from the sun with clothes, sunglasses, a hat and sun block.
- Wear waterproof clothing to avoid getting wet if it rains.
- Drink plenty of fluids before and after your walk. If you are taking a long walk, take water with you.

- Vary your walking routes so you can enjoy the change in scenery.
- Walk with a friend and combine physical activity with socialising.
- Join a local walking club.
- If you have a medical condition or any health concerns, check with your doctor before you start any type of physical activity program.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local council – for information about walking groups, walking tracks and parks
- Bushwalking Victoria Tel. (03) 8846 4131

Things to remember

- Aim to walk for 30 minutes a day or more on most days of the week.
- If you can't manage 30 minutes a day, remember 'even a little is good, but more is better'.
- Movement for health and fitness should be carried out most days of the week.
- Plan to cover a set distance each day, regardless of the speed or time taken.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Physical Activity Australia

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2011 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.