
Walking - the benefits for older people

Summary

- Walking can improve your health and wellbeing, and can help you to live independently for longer.
 - Exercise doesn't have to be strenuous; a moderate amount of activity can bring you all the benefits of exercise. You can choose to walk at a steady pace for a longer period of time, or you can have shorter bursts of more strenuous walking, either quickly or up hills or stairs.
 - Talk to your doctor or allied health professional if you have health conditions or haven't been active for a while. And make sure you have everything you need, especially a comfortable pair of shoes.
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Walking has so many benefits for older people. It can improve your health and wellbeing in many ways, and it can help you to live independently for longer.

Walking can:

- strengthen your muscles
- help keep your weight steady
- lower your risk of **heart disease, stroke, colon cancer** and **diabetes**
- strengthen your bones, and prevent **osteoporosis** and **osteoarthritis** (regular walking could halve the number of people over 45 who fracture their hip)
- help reduce blood pressure in some people with hypertension
- improve your balance and coordination, and **decrease your likelihood of falling**
- keep your joints flexible
- increase your confidence and mood, and help you feel better all round
- improve your energy levels and increase your stamina

- **reduce anxiety or depression**

- improve your social life – walking is a great way to get out and meet people or socialise with your friends.

Being able to walk without help is one of the strongest indicators of whether someone can live independently. Older people who exercise regularly are more likely to walk without assistance and do things for themselves around the house.

Exercise doesn't need to be strenuous to be beneficial for your health. In fact, the **Australian Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines** recommend older people aged over 65 do 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity each day.

You could choose to walk at a steady pace for longer periods, or in shorter, quicker bursts, or up and down hills or stairs. It all helps.

Before you start walking for exercise

Almost every older person can do some form of exercise. But **before you begin, talk to your GP about the level of exercise that's right for you**. This is especially important if you haven't exercised for a while, or you want to try something particularly strenuous.

If you have any conditions or health problems, even if it doesn't seem significant, it's important to consult your doctor for guidance. They can help you choose suitable activities to match your health and fitness needs, or they may refer you to an exercise professional. You might be eligible for a free preventative health check. Ask your doctor if you qualify.

Some questions you may want to ask your doctor include:

- Are there any exercises I should avoid?
- Could any illness, operation or injury I've had affect how I exercise?
- How can I exercise safely if I have high blood pressure, diabetes or cardiovascular disease?
- How can I increase my exercise gradually?
- How can I manage any ongoing health conditions I have (such as arthritis)?

If your doctor has concerns about a particular exercise, ask about the concerns and whether there are any alternative activities.

If you develop any new symptoms after you start getting active, see your doctor straight away. New symptoms could include:

- dizziness
- chest pain
- shortness of breath
- unplanned weight loss
- sores that won't heal
- pains anywhere in your body.

Discontinue exercising until you've seen your doctor and worked out what is causing your symptoms.

What you will need for walking

For starters, make sure you wear correct shoes for walking. Comfortable sneakers work well for most people. If they're new shoes, try them on first to make sure they fit well and are comfortable.

If you have foot problems or want advice about the best suitable footwear, talk to your doctor or **podiatrist**, who can help you get started and keep your walking program on track.

If you use a cane or a walker, don't let that stop you either. These can improve your balance and help lighten the load on your joints to make it easier when you're out and about.

If you'd like support but don't have a cane or a walker, talk to your GP or **physiotherapist** for help. Remember, all

walking aids need adjustment, and should be properly maintained. So see a professional to ensure you have the right fit along with anything else you might need.

Walking with a friend

Walking with a friend or loved one has many benefits:

- it makes exercise more fun
- it helps you make new friends, and build up friendships you already have
- it is harder to cancel a walk when you know you have a friend waiting for you
- you'll probably walk further and meet more often with a friend
- walking with a friend is safer.

To find a walking group near you, visit Heart Foundation Walking.

Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- Physiotherapist
- Exercise physiologist
- Podiatrist
- Registered exercise professional
- **Fitness Australia** Tel. **1300 211 311**
- **Heart Foundation Walking** Tel. 13 11 12 to find a group in your local area

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