



## Walking for Health

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Walking is the most commonly performed type of exercise by Americans. There are many reasons why people make walking their exercise of choice. It can be performed in many different environments and does not require specialized equipment. It can be done alone or with others. It can be performed in short bouts throughout the day or in longer dedicated periods of time. Walking can be done at one's own pace and thus can suit the needs of various fitness levels. Although people commonly choose walking as an activity to help achieve health and fitness goals, some may ask, "Is walking really good for health?"

### WALKING AND DISEASE RISK

Many studies have looked at the impact of walking on various diseases and conditions. Although there are exceptions, most investigations have found a positive link between walking and good health. One of the most cited studies on walking and health in women was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2002. The researchers found that women who walked enough to meet physical activity guidelines (30 or more minutes of moderate activity on 5 or more days per week) had a 30% lower risk of cardiovascular disease compared with women who did not walk regularly. This risk reduction was seen in African American and white women, who ranged in age from 50 to 70+ years, and in women across the weight spectrum. Given that cardiovascular disease is the most common killer of women, the risk reduction seen through walking is truly good news.

Walking also has a positive impact on other conditions. People with high blood pressure who begin regular walking routines generally see a fall in blood pressure. Likewise, walking is important in battling type 2 diabetes. Individuals who walk regularly will

increase the body's ability to manage blood sugar levels. Cholesterol and triglyceride levels also can be improved through walking.

### WALKING AND BODY WEIGHT

Walking is a moderate-intensity exercise; thus, it will burn calories at a slower rate than vigorous exercise such as running or competitive sports. However, the moderate nature of walking allows people to walk for longer periods compared with more intense activities. At the University of Tennessee, we have shown that people who walk regularly have less overall fat and less abdominal fat compared with more sedentary individuals. We have demonstrated that people who adhere to walking routines, such as a pedometer-based 10,000 steps per day program, will lose weight over time. The weight does not come off quickly, but those who are committed to regular walking will see weight reduction. As is true for any type of exercise program, creating a negative energy balance (e.g., expending more calories than are consumed) is necessary for weight loss. Thus, calorie intake must be a consideration if weight loss is a primary goal.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF WALKING

Although the physical benefits of walking are well documented, there also are many positive psychological outcomes. One of the most commonly reported changes seen with regular walking is an improvement in self-efficacy. This means that the person feels more confident that he/she can continue to be a regular walker even when obstacles present themselves. This is an important benefit because self-efficacy is one of the most predictive factors in exercise adherence. Improvements in self-confidence and self-esteem as well as decreases in depression also have been shown through walking.

Although walking is not the best exercise choice for everyone, it is a valuable option for many wanting to improve health. Meeting the minimum physical activity goals, as previously stated, is a good early target for a walking program. Bouts can be performed throughout the day if time or endurance prevents you from getting all the walking in a single session. Eventually, you may want to extend your walking bouts and/or increase the pace of your sessions because these can help bring even more benefits to your exercise routine.

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