



The Wonders of Walking

Walking is almost like a wonder drug when it comes to our health. The benefits are so good, it's hard to believe! Walking is simple, requires very little equipment, can be done at almost any age and anywhere, and is the easiest health improvement strategy to maintain over time.

Walking for at least 30 minutes 5 times a week leads to being healthier, stronger and happier. For example, if people simply walked 30 minutes a day 5 days a week, the number of new diabetes cases could be cut by over half!

Not only is walking a great way to reduce risk of diabetes, but it also has extreme impacts on the risk of stroke. There are over 100,000 miles of blood vessels in our body. Walking helps these blood vessels stay healthy and more supple. Women who walk have a 43% lower risk of stroke. They also have lower stroke risk than women who do other high intensity exercise.

Walking 30 minutes most days of the week plays a role in our body's ability to effectively resist disease and reduce risk for chronic conditions, including cancer. Men walkers are two-thirds less likely to have prostate cancer and have a 60% lower risk of colon cancer. Studies show women who walk reduce their risk of breast cancer by 20% and have a 60% lower risk of colon cancer. Walking in adolescence reduces risk of breast cancer in postmenopausal women by more than 60%. Walking is important at every age.

Along with reducing the risk of cancer, this form of physical activity also improves recovery from cancer for those who have it. Women with breast cancer who walk have a 50% lower recurrence rate, and men with prostate cancer who walk have a 46% lower mortality rate.

Walking is healthy for the brain too! It increases the blood flow to our brain, leading to better cognitive function and improved memory, along with releasing endorphins that naturally boost our mood, relieve stress, and improve our overall mental health. Positive impacts on depression can be even more powerful than antidepressant medications and walking significantly increases medication effectiveness.

The brain consists of gray matter (tissue containing nerve cells) and white matter (tissue that connects those nerve cells by nerve fibers). In simple terms according to VeryWellHealth, "the gray matter of our brain is the computer, and the white matter is the cables that connect everything together and transmit signals." A great deal of research has been done on gray matter and the benefits of exercise, but a recent study by Agnieszka Burzynska, PhD neuroscience and human development professor at Colorado State University, concluded taking a few walks a week also helps keep white matter healthy and memory sharp. Walking has been proven to increase brain health and the size of the brain for walkers who are over 60 and reduce cell deterioration in the brain of those genetically at high risk of developing Alzheimer's.

Simply boosting our immune system is another reason to walk. Those who regularly walk are less likely to get colds, have 46% shorter symptom time if they end up with a cold, and have over 40% fewer sick days.

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If all this hasn't convinced you to walk yet, there's more! Walking reduces arthritis-related pain and can even prevent arthritis from forming in the first place. Since the majority of joint cartilage does not have a direct blood supply, it gets nutrition from joint fluid that circulates as we move. The movement and compression from walking squeezes the cartilage and moves in oxygen and nutrients. Walking protects joints as well by lubricating them and strengthening the supporting muscles.

We know walking can lead to weight loss, but did you know it can also curb sweet cravings? A 15-minute walk has been found to reduce chocolate and other sugary snack cravings and consumption.

Harvard researchers discovered walking counteracts the effects of weight promoting genes. Walking briskly for about an hour a day leads to cutting the effects of weight promoting genes in half. So even though we can't change our genes, we can still influence them simply by walking.

Although there is no magical cure or guarantee for any one of us related to any one thing, there is strong evidence to indicate walking does wonders. Take time to incorporate regular walking into your day.

Resources:

Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/5-surprising-benefits-of-walking>

Arthritis Foundation: <https://www.arthritis.org/health-wellness/healthy-living/physical-activity/walking/12-benefits-of-walking>

Mayo Clinic: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/fitness/in-depth/walking/art-20046261>



AHW Lesson Activities

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“Applying the Lesson”

Choose one of the following activities to apply what you learned about your health and your healthy goal setting. Write a short response (3 to 5 sentences) to describe what you did and learned from the activity selected. Report your Applying the Lesson results by Online form, email, fax or hard copy to your county Extension Office.

Option 1: Think about your activity habits. Do you designate a specific time/times to walk each day that add up to at least 10 minutes at a time for a total of 30 minutes? If not, list a SMART goal you would like to strive for that incorporates walking for at least 30 minutes in your normal daily routine. What will help motivate you to stick to your goal?

Option 2: If you include walking in your normal exercise routine, try changing it up. Plan a set distance to walk each day and time it to see how long it takes you. Work towards increasing the intensity and improve your fitness level by walking faster, walking up hill, walking with hand weights, walking longer, or changing the pace back and forth from quick to moderate throughout your walk. What specific changes could you make to your walking routine to increase your fitness level? How do you plan to incorporate those changes?

Option 3: Were you surprised by the many benefits of walking? If so, what surprised you the most? Have you or someone you know improved health through a daily walking regimen? What were the benefits?