Got Walking?

It’s one of the best ways to exercise

Fresh air, full strides and good health are all reason enough to get outdoors and begin walking. One of the easiest, low-maintenance ways to exercise, walking is something you can do alone or with friends; you can begin slow and gradually increase your speed, and the only equipment you really need is a good pair of shoes. Surveys indicate that walking is the most common activity recommended by physicians. It is particularly useful since it is a low impact activity with low risk of injury.

BENEFITS There are many benefits to participating in a regular exercise program such as walking. Reducing the risk of coronary heart disease is one of the most compelling factors, but there are other benefits as well. For one thing, exercise reduces anxiety and depression, and gives an enhanced feeling of well-being. It also contributes to weight loss due to energy expenditure, increased metabolic rate and decreased appetite.

Regular walking increases high-density lipoprotein (HDL) leading to a decrease in overall cholesterol levels and a decrease in blood pressure. In addition, a consistent walking program can improve or maintain aerobic capacity, which naturally declines with aging. Finally, regular weight bearing exercise such as walking will increase bone mineral content and slow osteoporosis.

HOW FAR / HOW FAST / HOW OFTEN? The questions of intensity and duration differ for each individual. Before starting any exercise program, one should always consult his or her physician. Most individuals will not need a specific test to determine the amount and intensity of a walking routine. Generally, an effective walking program for exercise is performed three to five times a week, with a duration of anywhere from 15 to 60 minutes depending on the pace. The faster the pace, or intensity (such as brisk walking), the greater the cardiovascular benefit. However, it should be noted that less intense but more prolonged sessions will increase endurance.

GETTING STARTED There are many ways to begin walking as a form of exercise. Some people simply go outside and walk around the block or around their neighborhood, while others may prefer walking laps around a high school track. If you’d like to measure your walking distance, drive the route in your car and check the mileage. You may also want to keep track of your progress in a notebook, and set goals for increasing your speed and distance. Participating in walking events is another way to enjoy this easy form of exercise and a great way to meet other walkers.

Remember to gently stretch before your walk and to warm up by beginning the walk at a normal pace.Warming up allows your heart rate and breathing to increase gradually. After five or six minutes, begin to increase the pace.Walk with purpose! During your first week, start with at least a five-minute walking workout, and increase the time by two to three minutes each week. Create a goal of a 30-minute walk at least three times a week, and you will be on your way to good health.

If you don’t want to keep a record of your progress, just get out there and walk and enjoy the day. The more you walk, the better you’ll feel and the more ways you’ll experience better health. Don’t wait — get started today!

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