

FEET FIRST!

Regular walking has many health benefits – plus it’s free, it’s easy and can be very sociable too. **Penny Hunking** highlights some of the great reasons to make walking part of your everyday routine

Only four in 10 men and less than three in 10 women manage to do the amount of activity recommended for good health



While you sit and read this take a moment to consider how long you’ve been sitting down, where you are and how you got there. When did you last stand up? How many steps have you done today? The benefits of keeping regularly active every day for the well-being of both your body and your mind are without dispute and walking is the ideal helper. It’s free, it’s easy and can be very sociable too.

“Being active regularly brings huge health benefits and walking is an easy way to start and maintain a physically active lifestyle”

WHY WALK MORE?

Typical physical activity levels in the UK are low. Only four in 10 men and less than three in 10 women manage to do the amount of activity recommended for good health. The recent Active People Survey found that almost a third of us (29 per cent) are classed as ‘inactive’. That means they’re doing less than 30 minutes of moderate physical activity a week! Children’s activity levels also fall far below what’s necessary for their good health. In addition to inactivity, the World Health Organisation include high blood pressure, smoking, high blood glucose levels and obesity as risk factors for poor health and premature death. With that in mind, we should of course aim to eat a balanced diet and keep a healthy weight but remember that

WALKING

keeping active plays a vital role in health far beyond helping us to stay in shape. Being active regularly brings huge health benefits and walking is an easy way to start and maintain a physically active lifestyle.

People who are regularly active gain vast health benefits over those who aren't and have a reduced risk of obesity, heart disease, diabetes and some cancers. They also have stronger muscles and bones so bone loss in later life is slowed. Studies conclude that regular physical activity helps mental well-being and helps you deal with stress better. Other benefits include improvement to mental tasks such as decision making, planning and remembering more things you did recently.

UK GUIDELINES FOR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Both adults and children should be as active as they can. We can, of course, get sabotaged in our efforts and good intentions get thrown out of the window! Just recently, driving to a nice place to walk I ground to a halt with a flat tyre. So much for the walk, but as the key to activity is to approach things on a weekly rather than a daily basis, I went the following day.

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Keeping active plays a vital role in health

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This works out at 30 minutes a day on five days of the week. This is where walking can be great to fit into your day. Step on it and walk at a brisk pace whenever you can. If you can talk you're doing fine but it's good to huff and puff a bit too.

If you slowly up the pace into something more intensive like a gentle jog or a run, you could achieve your activity target in just 75 minutes spread across the week but

**You're
'active'
if you
do
around
10,000
steps
daily**



this takes time and is not for everyone. In addition, avoid sitting down for long periods and do things to help your muscle strength such as exercising with weights or carrying your shopping home.

'Being more active doesn't need to take lots of time. Several short 10 minute bouts of activity can be equally effective'.

FEET FIRST!

You can walk in any flat shoes but you'll find it easier in lace up shoes or trainers, particularly if you're walking over a non-tarmacked surface in a park or another green space. Investing in the right footwear to walk to work, walk for pleasure or walk the dog will help you achieve your goals more easily.

WALK IN THE PARK

Consider the difference between walking down a busy street and walking in a park, down a river bank or along the coast. Doing something active in a natural environment is

known as 'green exercise' and can provide health benefits above and beyond physical activity in other environments. Physical activity in parks can significantly restore mood and energy levels and interaction with nature brings mental health benefits in terms of relaxation and self-perceived confidence. Green exercise has also shown these benefits for those suffering job stresses and/or work in office based occupations. Green exercise is also thought to have a greater positive effect than walking in an urban environment for those who've suffered a coronary event.

Brisk walking can help if you're trying to lose weight or maintain a healthy weight



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WALKING FOR HEART HEALTH

Coronary heart disease is the single biggest killer in the UK. The British Heart Foundation (BHF) recommend you 'Put your heart into walking'. Your heart is a muscle that needs exercising too. The BHF say regular walking can help give your heart the workout it needs: <https://www.bhf.org.uk/publications/being-active/put-your-heart-into-walking>.

WALKING FOR WEIGHT LOSS AND WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

Brisk walking can help if you're trying to lose weight or maintain a healthy weight. The US National Weight Control Registry tracks the behaviours of over ten thousand people who've lost weight and kept it off. Ninety-four per cent of Registry participants increased their physical activity and the most frequently reported activity they did was walking. To keep their weight off, ninety per cent exercise for about one hour every day.

ACTIVITY TRACKERS, Pedometers AND THE REST

Both adults and children tend to overestimate how much exercise they do. It's hard to know how much we've done and some people turn to the use of trackers. Using your mobile phone, a pedometer



Try and fit more walking into your daily life

or wrist worn fitness tracker to monitor your progress may help, but simply using a tracker isn't the key to fitness or weight loss - you still must make lifestyle changes. Monitoring activity is useful but it's not the whole story. As a rule of thumb, if you do less than 5000 steps daily you're in the sedentary lifestyle category and you're 'active' if you do around 10,000 steps daily.

STAY SAFE

Build up how much you do over time. Don't walk if you're not feeling too well and always stop if you start to feel dizzy or particularly tired. If walking alone, tell someone where you're going and when you'll be back. At night, walk with a friend and wear something highly reflective so you can be seen.

While it's tempting to listen to music, remove your headphones unless you're walking on a treadmill as this can make you oblivious to what's going on around. Music can be amazingly motivating and help you stride out but you may not hear a car, a motorbike, a push bike or a runner overtaking you and cause an accident while out walking or running.

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TOP TIPS

TAKE TIME.

Make walking part of your everyday routine. Build up how much you do and how often you walk over time

GET SMART. Plan when and where you are going to walk.

GO GREEN. Walk in a natural environment - enjoy listening to the trees, the sound of water, the birds and whistle of the wind.

SPLASH THE CASH! Walking is free but invest in a decent pair of trainers or walking shoes.

GET SOCIAL. Walk with family members or a friend. Consider enrolling in a local walking club.

DOUBLE CHECK. In doubt about how much walking you should do? Consult a health professional.



AUTHOR BIO

Penny Hunking RD, R.SEN and Editor of *Eating Well, Living Well*, loves life, food and keeps regularly active. For many years, Penny taught a regular programme of fitness and exercise classes. These days she still practices what she preaches and can regularly be found in the gym, at the lake or walking and cycling (preferably along bridal pathways and local canal and river routes) around her local area.

