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Walking for exercise: What could help you walk more?



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Getting too little exercise is bad for fitness and health in the long term. People who are very inactive, for example, will be at higher risk for chronic diseases like type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease and bowel cancer. Even a half hour of brisk walking on five or more days of the week can help keep the body healthy. If you work for five days a week, walking 15 minutes to and from work means you reach this minimum goal. Although that does not sound like a lot, it is more exercise than many people with very sedentary lives get. Most people would benefit from getting more exercise, but even a small extra amount of exercise could make an important difference for people who are very inactive.

Regular brisk walking is a form of moderate-intensity exercise

Brisk walking is probably almost ideal as a form of exercise - and as a form of transport. When you walk briskly you use up enough energy to meet the criteria for moderate-intensity exercise. Brisk walking is a lot faster than strolling, so it increases your heart rate. You do not have to get out of breath, but you do have to exert yourself more than if you are just strolling. For most people brisk walking is a simple, pleasant and familiar form of exercise. It is particularly popular among women. Unlike many other forms of exercise, it can usually be fitted into people's daily routine.

You do not need special clothes, sporting equipment or a gym to walk, it is free and is usually possible to continue into old age. Walking has a lower injury rate than many other kinds of exercise, where falling or injuring muscles or joints can be more common. It is also good for the environment if people walk instead of using transport that causes pollution and other problems.

Research on strategies that could encourage regular walking

There have been many studies that looked at the possible health benefits of walking. You can read more about research into the effect walking might have on cardiovascular (heart) health and life expectancy here (URL:

<http://www.informedhealthonline.org/index.395.en.html>)

. But what can help people get walking more? Researchers from the Scottish Physical Activity Research Collaboration looked for studies that could answer this and other questions, such as what do effective methods for increasing walking have in common? For whom do these methods work, and how much more do they walk?

The researchers found 19 randomised controlled trials that tested what happened when half the people followed the walking encouragement "programme" and the other half did not. They also found another 29 trials that, for example, compared what happened to people before and after they tried a particular walking programme. These trials looked at different methods of motivating or supporting people to walk more. These included advice from health professionals or other experts, individual support via telephone, the internet, using a pedometer to count how many steps you walk, group sessions for encouragement and learning, or going walking in groups.

The people in these trials and other studies were from many age groups and different social backgrounds. There were very inactive or sedentary people in the groups, as well as many people who already got more exercise. Professional athletes and people studying sports were not included. Some of the studies were specifically about encouraging walking as a means of transport - that is, to walk instead of using the train, bus or car.

The researchers came to the conclusion that there are several approaches that can help people walk more, especially people who are currently getting very little exercise but who want to be more active. On average, people who try these programmes walk an extra 30 to 60 minutes a week. For people who are very inactive, even 30 minutes extra a week is an important improvement that could benefit their health. Some people walk a lot more if they find that walking fits well into their daily lives.

Motivational strategies work best when tailored to the individual

The type of approach that could work depends very much on the individual, their tastes and their way of life: the extra walking has to become a part of their regular routines. If you would like to get some help to encourage you to walk more, here are some of the kinds of activities the researchers found could help:

- Talk with your doctor about options that might be suitable for you personally, in your daily life and with your health condition and fitness level.
- Use internet sites that offer programmes to help you walk more.
- Join a walking group.
- Try to cut down how much you use your car, taxis or public transport, and walk instead.
- Use a device that gives you direct feedback about whether you are walking more, such as a pedometer (also called a step counter). This is a small device that counts your steps or the distance you walk - there are pedometers you wear on your hip, others that go in your shoe and even mobile phones that also measure how much you walk. But this needs to be supported by some kind of ongoing encouragement, or another way of actively monitoring your progress.

The researchers pointed out that when it comes to being encouraged to walk more, "one size does not fit all". Motivational strategies work best if they are tailored to the individual's daily life and personal needs. What sounds appealing to you will probably be more likely to help you to walk and keep on going. The most important thing is that brisk, more strenuous walking becomes so much a normal part of your life that you keep doing it all year round.

Author: German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)

Sources

Ogilvie D, Foster CE, Rothnie H, Cavill N et al. Interventions to promote walking: systematic review. *BMJ* 2007; 334: 1204.
[Full text (URL: <http://www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/334/7605/1204>)]

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Evidence basis of our health information

Our information is based primarily on systematic reviews of the effects of health care. Systematic reviews are necessary to gain an objective picture of health care. In order to do this, a clear question is formulated. Researchers then find all the relevant studies that could answer this question. They then evaluate those studies.

You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at **www.informedhealthonline.org**

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