

# WALKING YOUR WAY TO BETTER HEALTH

by Ralph C. Bencivengo, D.C., C.C.S.P. and Colleen M. Mulryne, D.C.

**Cardiovascular disease** is a serious health threat. Nearly 5 million Americans suffer from it. Men and women are equally at risk. One of the safest and most effective ways to reduce your risk and improve your cardiovascular fitness is by walking\*.

Walking is an ideal low impact aerobic exercise. If done regularly, it can reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer, lower total cholesterol, raise healthy HDL cholesterol and lower blood pressure. It can help maintain healthy bones and muscles, stabilize blood sugar, improve immunity and relieve some of the stress in your life. Thousands have realized the physical and psychological benefits of walking. That's why walking has become one of the most popular ways to stay fit. Another reason is because it's cheap – all it takes is a little motivation and a comfortable pair of shoes.

## REDUCE HEART DISEASE RISK

According to the Cooper Institute for Aerobics Research, men who walk at least half an hour, six days a week, can cut their mortality rate from heart disease in half, compared with those who are sedentary. According to the **Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health** which was released just prior to the 1996 Olympics, there is overwhelming evidence from epidemiology studies that a physically active lifestyle reduces the risk of sudden cardiac death (Leon et al 1987).

Regular exercise can also help to lower blood pressure. Studies report significant reductions in blood pressure following endurance exercise training (Fagard & Tipton, 1994; Am. College Sports Med. 1993).

While physical inactivity is casually linked to an increased risk of coronary heart disease (Powell et. Al. 1987; Black 1994), regular amounts of moderate physical activity can lower risk.

## BOOST ENERGY

Studies demonstrate that those who exercise have more energy and have a lower incidence of illness. Adults who spend more time participating in regular exercise, sports or other physical activities also report fewer symptoms of depression\*\* and anxiety than persons who reported no or low levels of participation in these same activities (Ross & Hayden 1988). You may not want to participate in a sports program but even just ten minutes of brisk walking can boost your mood and energy level for 1 to 2 hours.

## KEEP WEIGHT IN CHECK

Exercising three times a week may be enough for cardiovascular fitness but it is not enough for weight control. You need to walk most every day to control weight and to increase your metabolic rate (that's the rate at which your body burns calories). When combined with a low-calorie, low-fat diet, walking daily can help reduce body weight and fat. It's an effective calorie-burner. An hour of brisk walking burns about 350 calories. Once your metabolic rate increases, you will continue to burn calories even after you've finished exercising. Imagine burning calories while you sleep!

Regular exercise helps fight the aging process. While many women spend hundreds of dollars each year on cosmetics trying to look younger, the best anti-aging formula doesn't come in a bottle and it's free - just exercise!

## GETTING STARTED

Before starting a walking program, there are a few things you need to know. First, to maximize the benefits of any aerobic exercise, you must sustain an activity for at least 20 to 60 minutes at each session. Second, if you are out of shape, start with a 10 minute workout and gradually add 2 minutes a week until you reach your goal. And third, always take a few moments to do warm-up exercises. Stretching your major muscle groups will help prevent injury.

After a few weeks of exercise and your endurance improves, you can transform your leisurely stroll into a bona fide workout. Follow these walking guidelines used by the famous marathon walker Ruth Artz:

- Take long strides using your gluteal muscles (the muscles in the buttocks) to propel you forward.
- Bend your arms slightly, swinging them as you walk.
- Stand up straight with your abdominal muscles tucked in.
- Maintain a pace at which you are breathing deeply but can still carry on a conversation, although you would prefer not to.
- If your breathing becomes labored and conversation difficult, you are working out too hard. Anytime you feel out of breath or have any pain, slow down or take a break. If these problems persist, consult your doctor.

You needn't make it your goal to look and train like an Olympic athlete to reap the many health benefits of walking. You just want to achieve a certain degree of conditioning and maintain a

healthy weight. Even a leisurely walk for 20-30 minutes a day is beneficial. If you don't have 20 minutes to spare, do two 10-minute walks. The key to your success lies within yourself, so lace up your sneaks and put one foot in front of the other and you too will be walking your way to better health. ❖

## General Tips for Good Health

- Eat a healthy diet.  
Eat 3-5 servings of vegetables and 3-5 servings of fruits each day. Whenever possible, obtain your vitamins from foods. Vitamins in their natural form through foods work with other substances to convey a protective immune effect. Also, eat 6-11 servings of breads, cereals, rice and pasta each day. Choose whole grain and less processed foods whenever possible. Fruits, vegetables and whole grains have fiber which rids the body of toxins. Aim for 25 - 30 grams of fiber a day. And don't skip breakfast. Studies show that those who eat breakfast daily are less likely to overeat later in the day.
- Avoid alcohol  
Alcohol is high in calories, slows your metabolism and saps your motivation to exercise and eat a healthy diet.
- Avoid caffeine  
Caffeine causes your body to excrete more calcium in the urine. This loss of calcium can weaken bones and make caffeine drinkers particularly susceptible to osteoporosis. If you must have your morning coffee to get you going, limit it to two 6 oz. cups of coffee or two cans of soft drinks a day.
- Don't smoke
- Get a good night's sleep
- Minimize your stress  
You can't avoid it so learn how to control it and lessen its harmful effects. People who exercise are better able to deal with stress.
- Exercise regularly

\* Always check with your doctor before starting any exercise program.

\*\* Depression is a serious illness. If you feel depressed for longer than a 3-week period of time, discuss your symptoms with your doctor or health care professional.

Dr. Bencivengo and Dr. Mulryne practice chiropractic medicine at Body Rehab Fitness Center, Hamilton Township, NJ.

Copyright © 1999 WHF. All Rights Reserved  
Women's Heart Foundation  
P.O. Box 7827, Ewing, NJ 08628  
Ph 609-771-9600 / Fax 609-771-9427

**WOMEN'S HEART FOUNDATION**