Matthew Axtman, DO
Corewell Health Orthopedics

Walk This Way

What is one of the oldest and least injury-prone exercises that also provides the benefits of weight loss, decreased incidence of heart disease and diabetes, improved brain function and mood? Walking!

Sure, running, weight lifting, cycling, and swimming are all great exercise options and give you a significant workout if done properly, but not everybody wants to or can participate in them. Everyone should find an exercise regimen they are comfortable with and enjoy. And walking is a great option that, if done properly, can provide similar outcomes. Whether you are a seasoned walker, a beginner or someone who needs the motivation to start an exercise routine, it is important to understand why you are walking, the benefits of walking and how to stay motivated and meet your goals.

We are constantly told that we need to exercise and reminded of the benefits it provides. But it can be difficult to start or continue a program. Setting a goal will give you something to strive for and help motivate you to meet your objectives. Many people strive for 10,000 steps a day, but research has shown that walking 15,000 steps a day provides the most benefit. Knowing the benefits of walking may help keep you on track.

Weight loss: Let's be honest, we live in a world that is always trying to lose weight. Sometimes exercise can be intimidating, and we think that we must work out for hours to lose weight. This is not true. Walking can be an easy way to start a weight-loss program and maintain your weight loss. Walking about 10,000 steps a day (equivalent to about five miles) can burn around 500 calories. You don't have to start with that distance, but if you work up to it and do this every day for a week, you will have lost one pound (3,500 calories). While one pound is not a lot, it can add up over the span of a year, particularly in combination with a calorie-cutting diet.

Improved bone and joint health: Exercise can be difficult and painful if you are suffering from osteoarthritis. A low-impact exercise program such as walking can actually help lubricate the joint and, in turn, decrease the pain. As you lose weight, you decrease weight forces through the joints, which also helps alleviate pain. Every pound of excess weight is three to five pounds of force through each weight-bearing joint. So, being 10 pounds overweight translates into 30-50 pounds of force through a joint. As we age, our bone density (thickness of bone) also decreases and puts us at risk for fractures. Walking has the added benefit of increasing bone density and decreasing risk of fractures, especially in the femur (thigh bone).

Reduced risk of chronic disease: Chronic diseases such as hypertension (high blood pressure), heart disease, diabetes, and COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) can have significant impact on the body and shorten your life span. A walking routine can decrease blood sugar levels in people with diabetes and, in some cases, allow them to wean off certain medications. It can also improve heart function and decrease blood pressure and risk of stroke.

Matthew Axtman, DO
Corewell Health Orthopedics

Improved cognition: Memory loss and brain function can decline as we age. Research shows walking can lead to increased grey matter in the brain, which makes the brain better able to process information and can decrease memory decline and the progression of Alzheimer's disease.

A stronger immune system: We really don't need to go into how important your immune system is, given the current state of the world; however, walking can improve your ability to fight viral and bacterial diseases and/or shorten the duration of symptoms.

Decreased cancer risk: Walking has been shown to decrease many types of cancer. One of the most noteworthy findings shows a decrease risk of breast cancer in women who walked seven or more hours a week.

Improved mood and reduced stress: Exercise increases certain hormones and neurotransmitters in the body and brain to improve your mental state and happiness.

So, how do you start or build a walking program? If you are just a beginner, there is no rush to walk 10,000 steps or an hour a day. You will risk injury if you try too much too soon. Instead, set your goals and plan how you will progress. You can find many online programs. Find the one that fits into your daily schedule and comfort level.

A simple beginner program starts with walking for 15 minutes a day at an easy pace, which is about one mile in 20 minutes, or whatever your feel comfortable with. Do this for a week and then increase your time by five minutes each week. Once you reach around 30 minutes of walking, your body should be conditioned enough to increase your walking speed. If you are comfortable with 30 minutes of walking, increase your speed to about 15 minutes per mile and then start to increase the time walked by five minutes each week. You can then progress into an advanced routine by increasing distances and speed and incorporating weights and hills.

One of the most important things to remember is to not get bored with your routine. If you have trouble staying motivated, change up your routine and increase the intensity. Don't always walk the same route. There are so many parks and trails that offer up beautiful scenery. Look for ones that also have hills and inclines to increase the intensity of your walk and provide even more of a workout. Another option is to add weights. You can carry hand weights (two to three pounds while swinging your arms, performing overhead presses or flies) as you walk or even wear a backpack that has weight in it (around 10-15 pounds or whatever weight you find comfortable). Interval training also is proven to help reach your goals and improve your conditioning. You can do this by walking at increased speeds for 30-60 second intervals every three to five minutes during your workout.

You do not need to go to a gym, purchase expensive equipment or work out for hours to improve your health. You can start a walking program today if you are new to exercise or add to its intensity if you are an experienced walker.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding an injury or pain, please reach out to one of our experienced sports medicine physicians at Corewell Health Medical Group Orthopedics

Matthew Axtman, DO
Corewell Health Orthopedics

at (616) 267- 8860. You can also find more information about our orthopedic program and providers on our website.