

Walking—Perhaps the Ideal Human Exercise!

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Humans are the only primates that walk upright. Our ancestors adopted this method of movement about 3.5 million years ago. Why? It may have reduced body surfaces exposed to the sun in a hot climate or possibly just a more efficient transportation system. If you are walking upright, the forelimbs are available for carrying food and materials and to use tools. Regardless, humans spread over the habitable areas of the globe and reached North America and the southeastern United States between 13,000 and 20,000 years ago. Just think about it-- Humans out of Africa and Asia to North America by walking and possibly by boat--not a single department of transportation anywhere.

In the good old days, a sedentary life style might have left you hungry or set you up as the next meal for the neighborhood saber-toothed cat. Heart disease, diabetes, obesity, cancer and stroke were probably of little consequence back then, since life expectancy was only about 30-35 years. Certainly there was stress; however, if you have got a big cat with giant teeth on your heels then stress is a great thing. Seasonal food shortages, injuries, acute disease and cold weather were probably far more pressing health matters than cholesterol or high blood pressure.

Today, life expectancy is almost 78 years and we do not have to be concerned with saber-toothed cats or stalking a bison for dinner. Inactivity is still not rewarded, and just like in the early days a sedentary lifestyle puts our lives at considerable risk. Inactivity along with diet and tobacco use contributes to two thirds of premature deaths in the United States. Diet and inactivity contribute significantly to heart disease, cancer, stroke and diabetes.

The benefits of walking are numerous. **Protect the Heart.** Walking helps reduce (LDL) low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (bad cholesterol) and raises (HDL) high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (good cholesterol). Walking can help prevent high blood pressure. If you have high blood pressure, walking may help reduce it. **Manage Diabetes Risk.** Regular exercise helps reduce the risk of developing type 2 diabetes. If you have type 2 diabetes, a walking program can help your body process sugar and lower your blood sugar. **Manage Stress.** Brisk walking can help reduce stress and a regular walking program can help fight feelings of depression and anxiety. **Maintain Flexibility and Strong Bones.**



Regular exercise can help build and maintain bones, muscles and joints, which promotes better flexibility and reduces the incidence of falls.

Manage Weight. One big benefit of regular exercise can be weight reduction.

Why the big deal about weight? Being overweight or obese, increases a person's risk of coronary heart disease, congestive heart failure, stroke, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, osteoarthritis, asthma, respiratory problems including obstructive sleep apnea, several types of cancer (i.e., endometrial, breast, prostate and colon), complications with pregnancy, female reproductive disorders (i.e., menstrual irregularities, infertility and irregular ovulation) and psychological disorders among others.

Get out of your vehicles, turn off the television, and get off the couch! Get out there and get active! You do not need a gym, special equipment or special training to start walking. Why walk? Walking is natural and we are very good at it; after all we have been doing it for 3.5 million years. Walking is a low impact exercise and risk of injury is very low. It is non-competitive; therefore, it is not stressful. It costs nothing, can be done anywhere and can have amazing health benefits.

Spring is here; choose a reason to get active. The spring ephemeral flowers will be out anytime if they are not already and the turkeys will be gobbling. Find yourself a place to walk in your community or get out and explore one of the many hiking trails we have here in Western North Carolina. Do not let *Inactivity* get you; be on the look out for him!

