

Walk Your Way to Healthy Aging

By Maxine Marcus, M.P.H

If exercise were a pill, it would be the most widely prescribed medicine in the world!

Why? Because certain exercises are good for every part of the body, including the brain. Specific exercises can be done and can show improvement in people in any physical condition, of any age. And exercise has been shown to be the #1 indicator of successful aging -- meaning people who exercise live longer and enjoy a better quality of life.

What is the best exercise? The best one is the ONE YOU DO! But, because it is the easiest, cheapest, and most convenient exercise, walking is the physical activity preferred by most older adults.

What's so good about walking? Brisk walking can condition your heart and lungs, strengthen bones and muscles, relieve tension, control weight, and make you feel good. You can walk by yourself, with a companion, or with an organized group. If you're a walker, you can take your exercise with you wherever you go—indoors or outdoors, around the block, or around the world. It takes no more skill than that of a two-year-old. Walks can be worked into your daily schedule—not necessarily demanding a large block of time at once. It requires no more of a uniform than loose, comfortable clothing and a good pair of shoes. Walking is an especially good activity if you are older, have been sedentary, or have joint problems.

WALKING TIPS

1. **Talk to your doctor.** It is unlikely that your doctor will advise you against walking, but he ought to know if you are changing your lifestyle, and he may have some suggestions pertinent to your condition.
2. **Start small.** If you have not been very active, be cautious for the first week or two. Only exercise for ten minutes the first few days, then increase the time by five minutes as you get more comfortable. Ideally, you should work this up to 30 minutes per day—not necessarily all at one time.
3. **Choose your ground.** Walk on a flat level surface. Walking on hills, uneven ground, soft earth, sand, or gravel is hard work and often leads to hip, knee or foot pain. Fitness trails, shopping malls, school tracks, streets with sidewalks, and quiet neighborhoods are good places to get a start.
4. **Warm up and cool down with a stroll.** Shin and foot discomfort can be avoided if you warm up before a brisk walk and cool down afterwards. A good practice is do a slow walk (stroll) for the first three to five minutes – then speed up to a brisk pace – then stroll again for the last five minutes.
5. **Set your own pace.** It takes practice to find the right walking speed. To find your best pace, start walking slowly for a few minutes, then increase your pace to one that is slightly faster than normal for you. After five minutes, see if you are out of breath. You're OK if you can sing a song, recite a nursery rhyme, or converse with a companion while walking briskly. Think of the soldiers and marines who march in cadence. They have found their optimum walking pace. You can find yours.
6. **Add arms and weights.** After you get comfortable with the footwork, you can add some arm movement by bending your elbows and swinging your arms vigorously. You can also carry some weight (purchased weights, food cans, water bottles) to optimize the workout.
7. **Good shoes don't have to be expensive.** Wear shoes of the correct length and width with shock-absorbing soles and insoles. Make sure they're big enough in the toe area, and that the back of the shoe holds your heel firmly. Shoes should have a continuous crepe or composite sole – not leather or a separate heel. They should have laces or velcro that adjust for support—not be a slip-on.
8. **If you like company, join a group.** Many people find they can feel safer, maintain their motivation, make friends, and have more fun if they exercise with a group. For a listing of walking groups and other daytime exercise classes for adults in Orange County, call the Office on Aging's **Information and Assistance line at 1-800-510-2020.**