



THE PERFECT PRESCRIPTION: WALKING

WHY IT'S AWESOME AND HOW YOU CAN DO IT MORE OFTEN (EVEN IN THE CITY)!

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There is a patient I recall treating while a student intern at the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine, who, aside from being a very nice person, is memorable for a conversation we once had. GB, who was about the age I am now (42), had juvenile rheumatoid arthritis and over the course of the years since the onset of his symptoms had lost the ability to walk any significant distance without severe pain.

The comment he made that I remember was that he missed taking long walks – a favourite activity of his when he was young. I remember this specifically because long walks are an unusual hobby for a teenager and also because I have always loved walking (even as a teenager). Before having children, my wife and I didn't own a car, using public transit and bicycle to move around. But, time permitting, we walked (often including from our office to home – a distance of over 10 kilometers) at every opportunity. I suppose this disclosure on his part made me realize how grateful I was/am for such small pleasures.

Why walk?

The true benefits of walking are often overlooked in "modern" Western culture, having been indoctrinated with the idea that "no pain=no gain" and that activity without structure, sweating and even next-day muscle soreness does not qualify as "exercise".

Although the benefits of being active have been recognized since the ancient civilizations of India and China, some 5000 years ago, activity in those societies constituted more gentle pursuits such as yoga, martial arts like tai-chi and dancing. In fact, in Traditional Chinese Medicine theory, "vigorous" exercise is seen as detrimental to health and is expressly discouraged. It is only in the past 40-or-so years, primarily in North America, that "working out" has come to be seen as a healthy behaviour, used to offset an otherwise sedentary lifestyle.



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The view of gentle activity as having no impact on health may be changing. In recent years, the benefits of walking have been validated by a number of studies. Moderate activity, such as a brisk walk, has been found to:

- Reduce risk of death by 31% compared to those engaging in no leisure-time activity.
- Reduce the risk of coronary heart disease by 19%.
- Reduce risk of developing Type 2 diabetes by 30%.
- Decrease the risk of colon cancer by 30 to 40% and that of breast cancer by 20 to 80%.
- Improve the birthing experience. Pregnant women who engaged in regular walking beginning at 34 weeks of pregnancy experienced less intense labour pains, had shorter labours and lower rates of cesarean births than those not walking more than normally.
- Provide relief of depression. Research on women who have depression found after a three-year follow-up that those who walk 200 minutes weekly have more energy, socialize more, experience better mood and are less limited by their depression.

How can I incorporate walking into my life?

Based on the majority of research, the required amount of walking to gain significant health benefits is 150 minutes weekly, preferably not all at one time (e.g., 30 minutes daily for five days-a-week).

Walking specifically to gain health benefits should be at the level of "moderate exercise". In walking terms: "briskly". For many of us, this works well in our Monday to Friday routine, as we may not necessarily have time for a leisurely stroll. Think of places to which you may walk quickly as part of your day:

- The bus stop or subway station on the way to and from work (maybe walking an extra stop to one 15 minutes away from home)
- With your children to and from school (if they are old enough to keep up with you if you walk quickly)
- For neighbourhood errands such as returning library books, picking up items at the post office or shopping for small grocery items
- During your lunch hour to do errands or simply to clear your head

The key to any successful behavioural change is to take the willpower element out of it. There are a number of ways you can increase your success at walking regularly:

- Plan and adjust your routine accordingly. Beginning your morning half an hour earlier will ensure you have those minutes to walk your children to school.
- Identify specific walks that can be made part of your weekly routine, and commit to them. This sounds self-explanatory, but by "preloading" the decision to have these walks, you will

eliminate the obstacle of having to "decide" to walk to the bus stop every morning.

- Create an environment that favours walking. In his excellent book *The Happiness Advantage*, researcher Shawn Achor describes what he calls the "20-second rule" – the idea that it takes 20 seconds to discourage the average person from engaging in a particular behaviour. To help you make the decision to walk rather than drive for local errands, store items required for walking (e.g., sneakers, a warm jacket) at the front door and keep your car keys in a place that requires some effort to retrieve (e.g., in a corner of the basement).
- Arrange to walk to school or the bus stop with a friend who goes the same way.



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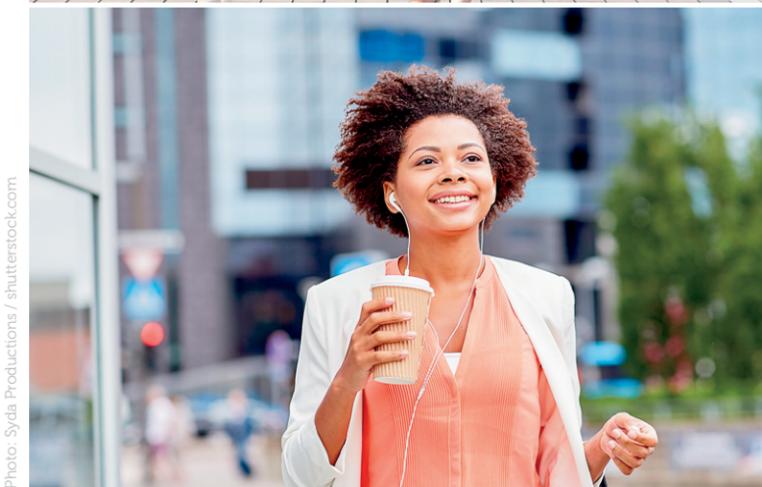


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Walking With Children

Walking your children to school has many additional benefits independent of the general health and environmental ones:

- It fosters the idea of walking as a transportation option and (hopefully) as a way of life (which may seem obvious, but for many, driving is the default mode of transportation for all activities).