



Walking back to HEALTHFULNESS

Forget sweaty gym work or all-action team sports, one of the most simple and enjoyable ways to get back into the swing of things is good, old-fashioned walking

There's little that can match the invigorating feeling of getting outside, taking fresh air into your lungs, raising your heart rate and gently stretching your muscles. It's strange then that so few of us take to the road or track regularly and make the simple pleasure of walking part of our weekly exercise routine.

But there is a scheme to help those who need a gentle nudge into action – the Walking the way to Health Initiative (WHI). Backed by BHF and the Countryside Agency, with part-funding from the Big Lottery Fund, it aims to get people walking.

Described by health experts as 'almost perfect exercise,' walking requires no special equipment or expense and is the ideal way to become more active – seven out of ten people in the UK are not physically active enough to benefit their health.

FIRST STEPS

The concept of 'health walks' was devised by an Oxfordshire GP, Dr William Bird, for his patients in April 1995. Developing the simple idea, the WHI was launched in October 2000 and aims to improve the health and fitness of more than a million people by the end of 2005.

So what makes a walk healthy? At what stage does pottering around become beneficial to your heart, lungs and other organs? The definition of a health walk is a brisk walk undertaken on a regular basis. With regard to cardiovascular health, the walk should be purposeful, in other words more than just a stroll.

While intensity is important, regularity is also a key factor in making a walk part of your exercise routine. One aspect of the WHI scheme that can help with this, is it provides a focus for walking groups, allowing individuals to join regional

organisations and their activities. For those needing motivation, group sessions can provide a social element that enhances what might otherwise be a solitary routine.

One family which experienced first hand the help a walking group can offer is Betty and Roger Millard. Several years ago, Roger had major heart surgery and, despite previously leading an active life, his condition and medication left him feeling low. In September 2000, one of the founders of the Putnoe Health Walkers knocked on the Millard's front door and invited them to join a weekly walk.

"His encouragement and enthusiasm made us feel maybe we would give it a try, if only for a few weeks. The truth is, due to the friendliness and concern that both leaders have shown, we are still turning up each week with enthusiasm," says Betty.

The Millards feel healthy walking has benefited them both. "Not only have our fitness levels risen, but, just as importantly, our inspiration to meet and mix has greatly improved. At the end of the morning, we all enjoy the social chat which includes listening and discussing future walking plans over a cup of tea," adds Betty.

One relatively inexpensive device that has helped many walkers keep up their initial



DID YOU KNOW?

Walking can help prevent and manage heart disease – regular exercise can halve the risk of coronary heart disease, particularly in men who walk briskly. It has been estimated that just under one third of all coronary heart disease incidence and one quarter of stroke incidence could be avoided by appropriate exercise. Regular exercise can help reduce high blood pressure. Moderate intensity activity such as walking appears to be at least as effective in reducing blood pressure as more vigorous activity.



CASE STUDY

A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?

In Salisbury, patients on the Phase 4 Cardiac Rehabilitation programme participated in a six week trial of step counters. Here's what they had to say...

Trevor, 51: "Very good. Made you realise you weren't walking as far as you thought you were – then made me realise how much you were actually achieving. Also made me think how important it is to keep it up. If I couldn't attend the Cardiac Rehab session, wearing the pedometer made me do more to compensate – the 10k step target was a good idea."

Ken, 57: "Very good thing to do. It made me want to exercise more but I was very surprised how much I was actually doing in my normal working day."

Sue, 57: "Very surprised how much I was doing day to day but it has encouraged me to go for a long walk every day."

Rosemary, 60: "Very good. Made me more aware of how long you had to work in order to get to the 10k step target. This made me realise how much activity I needed to do each day."

John, 68: "Made me more aware of the amount of activity I had to do each day. Sometimes it was easier to achieve this dependent on how much I was working and spending in my allotment working."

Ron, 61: "Very helpful to gauge how much activity I was doing. It particularly highlighted the fact that I wasn't doing much at weekends."

READER OFFER STEP COUNTER

Heart Health readers can save ten per cent on buying a step counter for £7.99, usually priced £8.99, including postage and packaging. Every counter comes complete with a *Quick start guide and Six week log*. To order your step counter (up to a maximum of 25) please send your details with a cheque made payable to WWH Ltd to:

Heart Health reader offer,
 WWH Ltd,
 PO Box 2709,
 Devizes SN10 1XZ
 Alternatively call with credit card details, quoting *Heart Health*, on 01380 736363 or fax 01380 721307. For further information, visit www.whi.org.uk



efforts is a step counter. Users input their average stride length into the counter and, once clipped to a belt or waistband, it logs every step taken throughout the day.

Depending on levels of fitness and activity at the outset, one programme aims for 10k steps a day, which exceeds the recommended 30 minutes of exercise three times a week and can help weight loss.

In North Tyneside, one primary care trust has been putting step counters to good use as part of its cardiac rehabilitation activities. Dawn Hoggarth of Northumbria Healthcare reports: "Over the last year, we have been using step counters in rehabilitation to allow individuals to see what their current activity levels are and set appropriate goals.

"We have one gentleman who used a step counter as part of his goal plan in becoming more active and to aid weight loss which was necessary for his bypass operation. It was suggested he use a step counter for a week, live his normal life and from this we would establish goals for him to achieve. These were set at a realistic level for each week, and, if possible, we aimed for a ten per cent increase in his number of steps. Initially, on average, he only achieved around 2,500 steps a day, but over eight to ten weeks, he increased his steps to around 8-9k per day and achieved his weight loss!"

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- www.whi.org.uk has a list of regional offices that can provide details of local walking groups throughout the UK. Alternatively, call 01242 533258 for details
- For local information in Scotland, visit www.pathstohealth.org.uk



Seven steps,
seven weeks
to a healthy

HEART

It's one of the first skills we learn in life, but it's just as good when getting back on track in later life, says Martin Feaver

Walking is one of those things we take for granted. We started by wobbling around as a baby and just picked it up naturally. So it's good news that walking is one of the best forms of exercise we can do. It's convenient, requires no equipment other than a pair of comfortable shoes and is very good for weight control, improving fitness and building a healthy heart. It's also an activity that can vary in intensity from a gentle amble round a shopping centre to the rigours of the Olympic speed walk.

If you are new to exercise, walking is an excellent way to start. Begin with three short walking sessions daily and slowly build up to a 30 minute session. For example, a walk to the shops is one, going to the post box another and walking

two lamp posts down and back is a third. As with all exercise, we can fall into bad habits over time. Our technique goes, the exercise becomes less effective and we get bored and do it less often. To prevent this happening, focus on one aspect of your walking each week. By thinking about where you are walking or how you are walking, exercise sessions take on a new dimension.

Once you have been through the programme suggested right, go back to the start. If you have a pedometer or step counter, add an extra week to count your steps during each walk. You can see how many steps you are doing and then focus on increasing the number. Try adding 100 steps each walk.

With these areas to focus on you will be surprised how different you will feel about getting off the couch, putting your shoes on and walking!

GET MOVING!

1. Always warm up and cool down
2. Walk tall, looking forward with your heart lifted, shoulders down and chest open – avoid leaning forward at the waist
3. Keep your stomach muscles slightly tense to prevent backache
4. Walk as if you have somewhere to go. Focus on achieving quicker rather than longer strides
5. Roll smoothly from heel to toe, pushing from the ball of your foot
6. Keep your arms relaxed, with your elbow bent at 90 degrees. Your hands should be in a partially closed curl – never clenched
7. Keep your elbows close to your body as they swing, with your hand staying lower than your breastbone

THE PROGRAMME

Week one: Regular walking

Set a time for a walk each day and stick to it

Week two: Technique

Focus on developing a strong walking technique

Week three: Change your pace

During your walks, gradually increase your pace until it is faster than usual but still comfortable. Keep it up for a few minutes then go back to your normal pace. Do this a couple of times

Week four: Walk further or longer

Every other day, go further or stay out longer. Five extra minutes is a challenge

Week five: Change your route

Find a new route or change the direction of your regular walk

Week six: Long walk

Plan a day to go for a long walk to the coast, a country park, or along a river

Week seven: Warm up and cool down

The body responds safely to a gradual increase (warm up) and reduction (cool down) in intensity. At the beginning of the session, try to kick your bottom, or add stretches to the end