

# The Numerous Benefits of Walking

If a daily fitness walk could be put in a pill, it would be one of the most popular prescriptions in the world. It has so many health benefits. Walking can reduce the risk of many diseases — from heart attack and stroke to hip fracture and glaucoma. These may sound like claims on a bottle of snake oil, but they're backed by major research. Walking requires no prescription, the risk of side effects is very low, and the benefits are numerous:

**Managing your weight.** Combined with healthy eating, physical activity is key to any plan for long-lasting weight control. Keeping your weight within healthy limits can lower your risks of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer, sleep apnea, and osteoarthritis.

**Controlling your blood pressure.** Physical activity strengthens the heart so it can pump more blood with less effort and with less pressure on the arteries. Staying fit is just as effective as some medications in keeping down blood pressure levels.

**Decreasing your risk of heart attack.** Exercise such as brisk walking for three hours a week — or just half an hour a day — is associated with a 30% to 40% lower risk of heart disease in women. (Based on the 20-year Nurses' Health Study of 72,000 female nurses.)

**Boosting "good" cholesterol** – the level of high-density lipoproteins (HDL). Physical activity helps reduce low-density lipoproteins (LDL or "bad" cholesterol) in the blood, which can cause plaque buildup along the artery walls — a major cause of heart attacks.

**Lowering your risk of stroke.** Regular, moderate exercise equivalent to brisk walking for an hour a day, five days a week, can cut the risk of stroke in half, according to a Harvard study of more than 11,000 men.

**Reducing your risk of breast cancer and type 2 diabetes.** The Nurses' Health Study also links regular activity to risk reductions for both these diseases. In another study, people at high risk of diabetes cut their risk in half by combining consistent exercise like walking with lower fat intake and a 5% to 7% weight loss.

**Avoiding your need for gallstone surgery.** Regular walking or other physical activity lowers the risk of needing gallstone surgery by 20% to 31%, found a Harvard study of more than 60,000 women ages 40 to 65.

**Protecting against hip fracture.** Consistent activity diminishes the risk of hip fracture, concludes a study of more than 30,000 men and women ages 20 to 93.

The list goes on and on. Many other studies indicate a daily brisk walk also can help:

- Prevent depression, colon cancer, constipation, osteoporosis, and impotence
- Lengthen lifespan
- Lower stress levels
- Relieve arthritis and back pain
- Strengthen muscles, bones, and joints
- Improve sleep
- Elevate overall mood and sense of well-being.

## **Keep it Steady**

A steady routine is the most important factor in getting the most out of your exercise program. Walking for at least 30 minutes a day, 5 or more days a week is recommended.

Use these tips to keep you on track:

- During your walks, you should be able to maintain a conversation. If you're breathing too lightly, increase your pace. If you can't catch your breath, slow it down.
- Walk around the local area after lunch or dedicate 15 minutes to walking up and down stairs. Climbing is an excellent way to strengthen your heart.
- At night, trade a half hour of TV for a brisk stroll around the block. Take a friend with you for company or get the whole family involved.

## **The Best Medicine**

Any amount of walking is good, but for the best health results, set a brisk pace and walk for 30 minutes at least 5 times a week. Be sure to check with your doctor on the level of exercise that's best for you.