

WALK TO wellness

Walking regularly has proven physical and mental benefits, so put on your takkies and step your way to health.
By Deidre Donnelly

The world's strongest leaders often share the wisest words. Take these, from former US president Barack Obama: 'If you're walking down the right path and you're willing to keep walking, eventually you'll make progress.' The right path, for those who haven't been exercising, is walking itself. It's an almost effortless way to get moving, it can be as sociable or solitary as you like, it's inexpensive, low-impact and remarkably good for the body and the mind.

'Many disregard walking as a "real" form of exercise. New and trendy must be better, we think, as we head off to our kata-boxing, Pilates or spinning classes,' says Kathleen McQuaide, from the Sports Science Institute of South Africa. Ignore the naysayers – or the voice in your head that says you "must train harder".

Today, many of us sit at our desks for hours at a time, putting our health at risk. Walking gets our bodies moving – and move they must. 'There's a perception that exercise is optional,' says Will Bolus, a Cape Town-based chiropractor. 'But it's an absolute requirement for maintaining proper health and wellbeing – like eating, breathing and drinking water.'

But if the thought of gym terrifies you, walk instead. 'It's something we all do instinctively, and the "start-up" cost and "barrier to entry" are virtually non-existent. Walking at a comfortable pace will also help get the body attuned to movement and exercise, so stiffness should be minimal,' says Bolus.

Need more motivation to tie up those laces? Consider the many benefits of walking...

WALKING....

♦ **Slims the waistline.** In South Africa, up to 70 percent of women and a third of men are overweight or obese, according to the SA Heart Foundation. Walking helps us slim down, as vigorous walking burns about 1 600 kilojoules an hour, according to Ray Bienedell, from Run/Walk for Life. 'Expect to get thinner, which will help you walk faster.' Walking not only reduces belly fat, but also the dangerous internal visceral fat linked to diabetes and heart disease. The trick, though, is to pick up the pace: Researchers from the University of Virginia found that power-walkers lost up to three times more visceral fat than regular strollers.

♦ **Can lower the risk of heart disease and stroke** – as much as running, it seems. A study by the Lawrence Berkeley National

Laboratory found that the energy used for brisk walking can reduce the risk of high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and high cholesterol (all risk factors for the development of heart disease or stroke) as much as more vigorous running.

Several other studies make equally positive conclusions. 'Just 30 minutes per day of regular walking can reduce your risk of heart disease by half,' says McQuaide. 'Similar amounts of walking can bring down a raised blood pressure by about 10mmHg.' Walking also lowers the levels of 'bad' LDL cholesterol, while raising the 'good' HDL kind. 'And the more you walk, the greater the benefit to your cholesterol.'

♦ **Keeps joints healthy.** Almost as soon as you set off, your body's joints release the lubricating fluid that prevents their early deterioration.

♦ **Lowens the body's insulin levels and can reduce the risk of developing type 2 diabetes.** After about 30 minutes of walking, your body begins to burn fat. This

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK

is because insulin, which stores fat, lowers. A 30-minute walk can also help treat type 2 diabetes – great news for the millions of South Africans who have the condition. Walking may even prevent it from developing. A study of people at high risk for diabetes from the University of Washington found that people who walked the most were 29 percent less likely to develop the blood-sugar disorder than those who walked the least.

♦ **Helps prevent osteoporosis.** We need to put some stress on our bones to improve their density, and walking qualifies as suitable (though gentle) weight-bearing exercise. Studies suggest that regular walking

can reduce postmenopausal women's chance of having a hip fracture by up to as much as 40 percent. The National Osteoporosis Foundation of SA recommends 30 minutes a day, but walking can be adapted to be even more effective: try modified jogging ('baby-step' jogging) every 10 minutes, or wear a weighted vest or backpack.
♦ **Can reduce certain cancer risks.** Walking lowers the levels of some hormones and growth factors associated with cancer, and alters digestion and metabolism, so can reduce the development and progression of specific cancers (breast, colon, prostate). In fact, the UK's Macmillan Cancer Support says

those with breast or prostate cancer can cut their risk of succumbing to the diseases by up to 40 percent by walking 1.6 kilometres daily. Walking also benefits survivors of breast, colorectal and prostate cancers.

WALKING ON SUNSHINE

The famous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud initially consulted with his patients on long walks. Today, some psychologists are also taking the talk from the couch to the street. Given the effects of walking on our moods, cognitive abilities and creativity, it makes sense.

Walking releases the endorphins that make us feel happy, enhance memory and improve the brain's ability to process information. It's no wonder that some of the world's most famous writers – think JK Rowling and Charles Dickens – recommended walking to clear the head. Swedish researchers tested participants before and after walking, and found they could name 60 percent more uses for an object (a measure of creative thinking) after a brisk walk.

And the more you walk, the less stressed – and more self-confident – you'll feel. Bolus explains: 'There is a massive psychological benefit that comes with movement in general. Neuroscience now teaches us that when we move, it activates a part of the brain that switches off the stress response.'

Bienedell concurs: 'A regular walking habit will build self-esteem as you reach your fitness and/or weight-loss goals.'

FIRST STEPS

SAFETY: Walking is one of the safer ways to start exercising. That said, as with any training programme, get your doctor's okay if you're overweight, over 45, if you have a chronic condition or if you smoke.



SHOES: You won't need an expensive gym contract or hi-tech gadgets to start but you will need a good pair of trainers. They should offer good shock absorption and be right for your foot strike. An informed shoe salesperson can help you out.

STATS: To track your progress, take note of things like your resting pulse, weight, body measurements and weight, distances covered, length of training sessions, etc. A log book or app can help with this. If you can, get a pedometer. Researchers at Stanford University found that people who used one walked about 2 000 more steps per day compared to those who didn't.

STRIDE: While walking is something we tend to do automatically, aim to develop a proper walking technique. 'Ensure your back is straight, although a slight forward lean is acceptable. Then "zip up" your abs and squeeze in the glutes; keep your chest out, and shoulders back, down and relaxed,' McQuaide advises.

SESSIONS: Bienedell says, 'The American Council of Sports Medicine recommends at least three sessions per week of 30-45 minutes of vigorous exercise for significant health benefits.' Have rest days between training days, and increase your distance by about 10 percent

Dos and Don'ts

- ✓ Sign up for group walks.
- ✓ Treat it like a proper exercise, with (realistic) short-term goals and longer-term goals that keep you motivated
- ✓ Stretch (quads, calves and hamstrings) for five to 10 minutes before and after.
- ✓ Breathe rhythmically. 'For example, inhale for three steps and exhale for the next three,' McQuaide suggests.
- ✓ Stay hydrated and keep your blood-glucose levels balanced with water and hydrating energy drinks. Bienedell says taking small sips regularly will avoid bloating or cramps.
- ✓ Keep it fun by alternating your routes.
- ✓ Consider safety. Avoid busy roads and, if you're walking in the dark, wear a safety vest and pair up or walk in a group. Play music at a volume that allows you to still hear surrounding noises.

DON'T

- ✗ Pound your feet. 'This puts unnecessary force on your joints,' says McQuaide.
- ✗ Buy shoes too small. The SSISA says there should be a thumbnail's width between the shoe's end and the big toe of your (larger) foot. And wear them in before a big walk.
- ✗ Ignore severe or prolonged breathlessness, nausea, dizziness, elevated heart rate, pain in your chest, left arm or neck, or extreme fatigue. These are potential warning signs that your body's in trouble.
- ✗ Follow the lead of people more fit than you. The great thing about Run/Walk for Life is that after a medical screening form and easy fitness level test, they put you in a group of a similar ability and fitness level.

every few weeks. And be patient: 'It takes six to eight weeks of training at least three times a week before you'll see significant changes,' he adds.

STRIDING ON

Once you're walking regularly, challenge yourself to improve your fitness and burn more kilojoules by increasing the frequency, duration and intensity of your sessions.

Consider:

- **'Beat the clock' challenges:** If it took you half an hour to walk 2km last week, can you do it in 25 minutes?
- **Counting your steps:** On an even piece of ground, measure how many steps it takes you to walk a minute slowly, briskly and fast. Then alternate low- and high-intensity walk days.
- **Interval training:** Within one session, alternate between walking slowly, briskly and fast. You could do so for set times (10 minutes) or distances (pole to pole).
- **Your diet:** If you've been walking but haven't made dietary changes, following a lower kilojoule eating plan could help you shed kilos. **B**

Walk of Fame

Graeme Carlson lost 40 kilograms – and he started by walking – making him a Run/Walk for Life success story.

He says: 'Before I joined, I weighed 150 kilos. I chose walking as anything more strenuous, such as running, would put too much strain on my joints, and I didn't join a gym as I am not a fan of crowds or having to wait for equipment. Regardless of how overweight or unfit you are, if you are able to walk, then with a little determination and perseverance, you can easily walk your way to better health. If I can do it, anyone can!'