

Walk Your Way Back into Health

A cholesterol lowering strategy.

by Janet Bond Brill

EXERCISE IS GOOD FOR YOU, and walking is one of the safest, simplest, most inexpensive, and cholesterol-improving strategies you can adopt.

We are a nation of inactive couch potatoes—60 percent of us are overweight and 25 percent of us are “sedentary,” meaning we rarely move—we perform no leisure-time activities that expend calories such as walking, gardening, or golf. More than half (54 percent) of adults do not get in enough physical activity to promote better health.

How much exercise is enough? It depends on your goals. If weight loss is your primary goal, you may need to exercise more than someone exercising to obtain other health benefits. To lose weight, you need to burn more calories than you consume.

Set a goal of 30 minutes of continuous walking every day. If you haven't been exercising regularly, start out slowly with modest increments and build up from there. A starting schedule would include 20 minutes of walking three days a week, progressing to five days, then six days, increasing walking time to 30 minutes. Do not worry about the pace until you can complete the full exercise prescription: six days, 30 minutes. After you achieve that goal, focus on speeding up your pace, because faster is healthier.

To get and stay motivated, give yourself tangible rewards, such as walking with a good friend or listening to your favorite music during your walk. Buy and wear a pedometer to monitor how active you are during the day. Draw up an exercise schedule each week and post it. Cross off each day that you meet your goal. Give yourself a reward such as a steam or sauna bath or massage. Put a treadmill in front of the TV, and only allow yourself to watch your favorite show if you walk on the treadmill. Keep an extra pair of running or walking shoes in your car and seize the moment while waiting to pick up the kids at school or during a game. If you plan to exercise in the early morning, prepare the night before: put the alarm clock across the room so you have to get out of bed to turn it off, and set out your exercise clothes. Hire a personal trainer. If you set times, pay for sessions, and find a trainer you like, you are much more likely to go. Pencil in exercise sessions on your calendar and follow through with the exercise session. Take an after-dinner stroll every night. Set aside 30 minutes to walk off dinner and relax. Organize a morn-

ing exercise group, or join a walking club. If you are accountable only to yourself, it's easy to find excuses not to exercise. Buy gadgets that make exercise more fun, such as a heart monitor, a GPS watch, or an MP3 player.

Here are eight important reasons to exercise: 1. Walking 30 minutes a day lowers LDL cholesterol. 2. Not exercising is as unhealthy as smoking cigarettes. 3. Exercise (walking briskly for more than 150 minutes per week) prevents diabetes. 4. Exercise helps you live longer. People who are fitter do live longer and better. 5. Exercise reduces risk of contracting breast and colon cancer. 6. Exercise will enhance your golden years. Low strength and fitness levels in the elderly frequently equate to frailty and loss of independence. Exercising into our golden years is an ideal strategy for attenuating the inevitable decline in fitness that comes with age. 7. Exercise is good for the brain and will dramatically cut your risk of senility. 8. Exercise saves you money by reducing your medical bills.



Why make the effort to walk? Once you finish that walk, the endorphins give you a high. Getting the blood flowing through your veins makes you feel more alive. Getting more physically fit will help you to live better in all areas of your life. And taking a daily stroll has the power to help ward off cardiovascular disease (heart attacks and stroke), diabetes, breast and colon cancer, osteoporosis, depression, Alzheimer's disease, and reduce the risk of erectile dysfunction in older men.

Walking is the most popular form of exercise. Walking is safe and easy and requires no special equipment (other than a good pair of walking shoes), no fancy clothing, and no expensive gym membership. It can be done just about anywhere and is a healthful type of aerobic exercise (exercise that uses the large muscle groups repetitively for a sustained period of time). All exercise is good for you, but aerobic exercise is most beneficial for making positive changes to your cardiovascular health profile—raising HDL and lowering LDL cholesterol—and blood vessels.

I find that walkers show a significant reduction in the amount of belly fat, the stubborn fat associated with the greatest risk of developing

health problems such as diabetes and heart disease. I also found that when people are responsible to another party and meet up with their friends, they walk more frequently and for longer periods. Walking with friends makes the walking a pleasure rather than an exercise chore.

Regular aerobic exercise, such as walking, favorably modifies heart disease risk factors (LDL and HDL cholesterol and blood vessel dynamics). Exercise training makes the heart stronger by improving its ability to contract, improving the heart's electrical stability, and increasing the supply of oxygen and nutrients to the heart muscle.

Regular aerobic exercise fights LDL and heart disease on four fronts: 1. Walking boosts LDL resistance to oxidation. Aerobic exercise increases the heart's production of an antioxidant enzyme (superoxide dismutase)—a key defender against free radical damage. 2. Walking changes the size and shape of LDL particles in your bloodstream, making them less dangerous. 3. If you are overweight with high cholesterol, you need to lose weight and exercise 30 minutes or more five days of the week. 4. The pace of exercise affects heart health. Brisk walking speeds up the flow of blood through the arteries, which reduces clogging and inflammation and helps prevent atherosclerosis.

Every walking session should begin with a five-minute warm-up, walking at a slow pace and gradually building up speed so that by the end of the warm-up you have reached your brisk walking pace. At the end of your walking session, take five more minutes to cool down, gradually returning to your initial slow pace. Be sure to finish every walking workout with a quick two-minute stretching routine focusing on calves, hamstrings, and quadriceps. Stretching after your muscles are warm will help increase your flexibility and prevent injuries. The stretching position should give you a feeling of tightness, never pain. Do not bounce. Gently guide your body to the point of tightness, breathe normally, and relax.

Remember to stay hydrated—drink water before, during, and after your workout—and dress for the elements. If the outdoor weather is severe, walk indoors.

Walking is virtually free of charge, safe, fun, and really easy to do. The only special equipment required is a good pair of walking shoes, which can make the difference between an enjoyable experience and a painful one. You need to find the right shoe for you, and that often comes through trial and error.

Make exercise a priority in life. Regular aerobic exercise will improve your quality of life, help you to live longer, lower LDL cholesterol, and help fend off heart disease. So get out there and take your daily walk! ♥

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ACTION: Use walking to lower your cholesterol.