

Script – Print – Walk This Way

Starting a Walking Program Might Be Your Best Medicine

It's no secret that walking has many benefits to a variety of people. Study after study has shown that people who participate in a walking program find substantial improvements in blood pressure, slowing of resting heart rate, decrease of body fat and body weight, lower cholesterol, better quality of life and greater endurance, among other benefits.

“Walking affects you physically in a positive way, but it also affects you mentally in a positive way,” says Matt Davidson, a physical therapist with OSF HealthCare. “You’re getting the cardiovascular component, you’re burning calories, and it’s also good for the legs and endurance. It helps with things we do on a daily basis – grocery shopping, walking around the neighborhood, yardwork – so it’s a very important aspect of everyday life.”

While walking may not be a better cardio workout than running, it may be the best choice for many people. Walking helps with increased flexibility, increased muscular strength, and reduces the risk of diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. And you don’t have to be a world-class athlete to reap the benefits of incorporating a walking program into your daily routine.

“A walking program is a very good choice for people with different activity levels, but particularly those who are starting an exercise program,” says Davidson. “You’re getting components of cardiovascular exercise, but you’re also getting those muscles to work through your legs; it doesn’t have to be long periods of time and it doesn’t have to be fast paced but just the activity level of going up from where you are now is a foundation to build on later or maybe with other exercise.”

The best part about walking is it can be done anywhere. Now is the perfect time to find a favorite nearby path, a city park or a walking trail. When the weather starts to turn, head inside to a shopping mall or invest in a treadmill with adjustable inclines, walking styles, and speed, all of which will help with caloric burn and target a specific muscle group.

“I think walking is more convenient,” says Davidson. “You don’t have to go to a gym to walk, you can walk around the neighborhood when the weather cooperates. You have treadmills sometimes at home that you can use. I’ve even had patients who walk laps repetitively around their basement. They listen to music and turn it into a fun activity that they enjoy and it doesn’t take driving across town to do it.”

Davidson offers other tips for beginning walkers. Find a walking buddy who will help with accountability. Purchase a good pair of comfortable, properly fitting shoes, the best financial investment you’ll have to make for your walking program. Remember to start any walk with a quick stretching routine or jog in place, and stretch after your walk to reduce soreness. Start your program slowly to avoid burnout, and keep track of your progress with a walking app or a journal.

“I would recommend you start at what you feel is a three, four, five when it comes to intensity on a zero to 10 scale,” says Davidson. “Work your way up and add maybe a quarter mile every time you walk, depending on your age and fitness level.”

Most importantly, Davidson adds that you should always check with a physician before starting any exercise program, especially if it’s something new for you. Learn more [here](#).