

An Easy Exercise with 31 Proven Health and Fitness Benefits

By JESS BARRON / What if I told you there is an exercise that has more than 31 major benefits for your health including everything from lowering your body fat percentage to toning your abs, decreasing lower back pain and reducing your risk of heart attack, stroke and glaucoma while also decreasing your risk of catching a cold or upper respiratory tract infection?

With so many Americans complaining about the cost of health care lately — what if I told you that this exercise can positively impact 8 out of the 10 most costly health conditions in the U.S.? (Heart disease, cancer, COPD, asthma, diabetes, osteoporosis, arthritis, and back problems.)

And — as if all that is not enough — it also improves your mood, boosts endorphins, reduces fatigue and lowers your stress hormones as well.

What's more, this exercise is absolutely free and you only really need one piece of equipment/apparel to do it. And most importantly, you don't need a lot of time. Only 15-40 minutes a day 5 days per week will tone and trim your body, vastly improve your health and could even save your life.

You probably guessed that I'm talking about walking! But I would be surprised if you were aware of all 31 benefits that walking can bring. More on those soon, I promise. First, let's find out how we're doing so far with regard to walking.

How Many Steps Do Americans Take Per Day Compared to People in Other Countries?

In a study published in October 2010 in the journal "Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise," researchers used pedometers to track the steps of 1,136 American adults. They found that people living in the U.S. take fewer steps than adults in Australia, Switzerland and Japan.

* Australians averaged 9,695 steps a day.

* Swiss adults averaged 9,650, steps a day.

* Japanese averaged 7,168 steps a day.

* Americans averaged just 5,117 steps a day.

According to the CDC, 36% of Americans are obese, while a 2010 Reuters article states that "During the past decade Australia, Japan and Switzerland have reported obesity rates of 16%, 3% and 8%, respectively."

And it's not just lower obesity rates; it's longer life expectancy as well. As A 2013 CNN article reported, 2011 data shows that 27 countries (including those daily walkers in Australia, Switzerland and Japan!) have higher life expectancies at birth than the United States.

Next, Let's Look at All 23 Health, Fitness and Wellness Benefits Walking Offers...

According to this excellent walking infographic, created by EverybodyWalk.org, walking:

* Boosts endorphins, lowering stress, fatigue and anger in 10 minutes.

* Reduces Glaucoma risk. (It reduces the pressure inside the eye, which lowers your chance of developing glaucoma, according to the Arthritis Foundation.)

- * Cuts Alzheimer's Disease risk by 50% over 5 years.
- * Decreases the odds of catching a cold by 30-50%.
- * Lowers blood pressure by five points.
- * Reduces colon cancer by 31% for women.
- * Engages and tones ab muscles.
- * Builds bone mass by reducing risk of osteoporosis.

Additionally, the GlobalFit walking infographic embedded and shareable below in this blog post, shows that walking can positively impact 8 out of the 10 most costly health conditions. For example, you can expect:

- * 54% lower risk of heart attack with 2-4 hours of fast walking per week.
- * 30-40% less risk of coronary heart disease with 3 hours of brisk walking per week.
- * 30% less risk of upper respiratory tract infections with a daily brisk walk.
- * 54% lower death rates for type 2 diabetics who walk 3-4 hours per week.
- * 40% decrease in lower back pain and disability.
- * Arthritis can be prevented and managed with regular walking.

Share this walking info with friends & family on Pinterest & Facebook!

According to the Arthritis Foundation, walking:

- * Improves mood. It increases mood-enhancing neurotransmitters and reduces the stress hormone cortisol, helping you feel less anxious or sad.
- * Can lead to a longer life. Recent research out of the University of Michigan Medical School and the Veterans Administration Ann Arbor Healthcare System says those who exercise regularly in their fifties and sixties are 35 percent less likely to die over the next eight years than their non-walking counterparts.
- * Decreases knee pain. Keeps joints lubricated. Movement increases the production of synovial fluid, which keeps knees lubricated and decreases pain and stiffness.
- * Lowers the risk of fractures. A Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, study of post-menopausal women found that 30 minutes of walking each day reduced their risk of hip fractures by 40 percent.
- * Reduces women's risk of stroke by 20 percent when they walk 30 minutes a day - by 40 percent when they step up the pace — according to researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston.

In its report on "The benefits of regular walking for health, well-being and the environment," (by the way, I highly recommend you read the full report!) the British charity C3 Collaborating for Health mentions that walking:

- * Decreases body weight, BMI, body fat percentage and waist circumference
- * Increases HDL ("good") cholesterol;
- * Increases muscle endurance.

November is National Diabetes Awareness month in the U.S. C3 Collaborating for Health also writes that "Type 2 diabetes is the chronic condition on which the effects of walking have been most researched." They further point out that walking has been shown to:

- * Reduce significantly the risk of developing type 2 diabetes.
- * Adults with diabetes who walk at least a mile each day are less than half as likely as inactive adults with diabetes to die.
- * Increase heart and respiratory fitness in adults with type 2 diabetes
- * Effectively control fasting and post-walk blood-sugar levels.

Then, there's mental health. C3 Collaborating for Health states that walking has been shown to:

- * Reduce physical symptoms of anxiety associated with minor stress.
- * Improve sleep quality
- * Be associated with better cognitive performance at school.
- * Improve the cognitive functioning of older adults (compared to stretching and toning).
- * Increase the size of the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex, potentially beneficial for memory. (Check out the study on this one.)

OK, Great, How Do I Get Started? What Do I Need to Do?

Go outside during your lunch break, and walk for 15-40 minutes. Try to do this four or five days per week. Ask your colleagues to take walking meetings, especially for one-on-ones. I have done this before in past jobs with both my managers and team members. Make walking your catch-up time with your family. My husband and I try to always walk our dogs together for 15-20 minutes each evening when we get home from work.

Every 10 minutes more you walk at a decent pace is about 1,000 more steps or more. Get yourself a pedometer, map your route on LIVESTRONG's Loops, or download a free mobile app such as Every Body Walk!, RunKeeper, Strava (which I use) or MapMyWalk. Every 2,000 steps (or approximately 20 minutes) will be about 1 mile. Every mile you walk will burn 65-120 calories, depending on your bodyweight. Here's more info on how to convert your mileage and pedometer steps into calories.

What Do I Need? There Was One Piece of Equipment...

It's a great idea to invest in a pair of supportive shoes designed primarily for walking. As I was not aware until recently myself, cross-training and running shoes are not designed for walking. As The Walking Site points out, "A walker's foot hits heel first and then rolls gradually from heel-to-toe. So, you will need a flexible sole and more bend in the toe than a runner. You should be able to twist and bend the toe

area.” Here are some brands of walking shoes we have tried, but there are many more out there. Just check out the “walking” shoe section at a local sports store.

Two brands of walking shoes that I have tried and found to be very comfortable include Prospects (which come in cool colors too) and Asics (if you prefer more neutral colors).

<< OLE Object: Picture (Device Independent Bitmap) >>

These are the Prospects Power Walk 604s I walk in regularly

Readers – Do you enjoy walking? Did you know about all of these health and fitness benefits that walking brings? How many minutes on average do you walk each week? Is there anything that holds you back from walking more?

–Jess

Jess Barron is Editor-in-Chief of LIVESTRONG.COM. Read some of her other health and fitness articles here. A longtime foodie and fan of Farmer's Market food, Jess particularly loves heirloom tomatoes, fresh figs with burrata cheese, and anything with pumpkin or peanut butter in it! Her love for food fuels her desire to exercise daily. Some of her favorite workout routines include running, yoga, P90X, INSANITY, and mixed martial arts. Jess's writing can also be found at Poprocks.com. She has appeared on MSNBC's "The Most," ABC News Now, and XM satellite radio and her writing has appeared on Wired.com and Yahoo!

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Read more: <http://www.livestrong.com/blog/an-easy-exercise-with-23-health-and-fitness-benefits#ixzz2kXuVTA7i>