

Take a Hike! (It's Good for Your Bones)

by Joanne Fagerstrom, Weavers Way Health & Wellness Committee

THERE'S A FREE AND NO-SKILLS-required remedy to get more exercise, strengthen your bones and decrease stress, and it's waiting just outside your door: Get out and go for a walk.

Countless research studies point toward the benefits of walking to improve overall fitness. Walking has not only been associated with stronger bones, joints and muscles, but also with a healthier heart and improved sleep and mood. And all you need is a decent pair of shoes and a safe place to do it.

Unplug and go outside

Studies have shown a clear association between high levels of the stress hormone cortisol and low bone density. There is now an abundance of research confirming the healing power of nature. Being in green spaces has been shown to lower blood pressure and cortisol levels as found in studies of the wonderful Japanese practice of *shinrin-yoku* or "forest bathing," where walkers amble through a forested park and take in their surroundings through all five senses.

Why a brisk walk is better

While walking at any speed is better than sitting on the couch, trying to kick it up a notch is even better for your bones and your overall fitness. How fast we are able to walk is considered to be a predictor of vitality and our ability to stay independent over the years.

How can you judge your walking pace? A brisk walker typically walks a mile in 15 minutes (4 miles/hr) while a slow walker covers that distance in 30 minutes.

To boost your pace, start slow and progress gradually. Consider using the interval training approach: Pick a distance, (the next lamppost you see, for example), and walk as fast as you can until you get there. Then resume your usual pace. Do it again a little farther down the trail.

Decrease risk of hip fracture

Need another reason to get out there and walk? Moderate levels of activity, including walking, are associated with substantially lower risk of hip fracture. This is not only because of the bone-strengthening effect of the increased mechanical load, but also because people who are more active are less likely to fall.

Walking groups provide health bonuses

The nearby Wissahickon and Green Ribbon walking trails provide us with beautiful public spaces in which to walk. But what if you can't get there, or just don't feel safe going by yourself? Joining (or starting) a walking club or walking with a friend not only can make you feel safer, but you may be more likely to stick to it over the long term if you have someone besides yourself to be accountable to.

Take care of yourself

You want your program to be successful, so avoid overdoing it on a hot day or setting your goals unrealistically high. And of course, as with any exercise program that you're just starting, check with your doctor before beginning.

See you on the trail!

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Views expressed in this article are those of the author; not necessarily the Health & Wellness Committee, and are not a substitute for talking to your own doctor.



Important Tips for Strengthening Your Bones and Preventing Falls

Tuesday, Sept. 11, 7-8 p.m., Bone Health Center, 8200 Flourtown Ave., Wyndmoor.

Exercise is a critical factor in improving and maintaining bone health. However, the evidence also shows that not all exercise is created equal! Join Joanne to learn safe and effective exercises for strengthening your bones and balance. To RSVP and for more info, visit the Weavers Way Online Events Calendar, www.weaversway.coop/events.