

## ***Heart Disease: Walking for a Healthy Heart***

### **Introduction**

Walking is a form of aerobic exercise and is one of the easiest ways to increase your physical activity and improve your health. Physical activity increases your heart rate, strengthens your heart, and increases blood circulation through your body, bringing more oxygen and nutrients to your organs. Exercise also increases your lungs' ability to take in oxygen, lowers blood pressure, helps to reduce body fat, and improves blood sugar and cholesterol levels.

### **Key points**

- Have a checkup before beginning an exercise program. If you have heart problems, your doctor may want to do tests to find out how much activity your heart can safely handle.
- Start out slowly at first, with a warm-up in the beginning, a faster pace in the middle, and a cooldown at the end.
- To stay motivated, walk with friends, coworkers, or pets. Set goals you can reach.
- Use a pedometer to count your steps. Wear it all day and try to take at least 2,000 more steps a day than you normally do, and gradually increase your steps over time.
- Try to do at least 2½ hours of moderate exercise a week.<sup>1</sup> One way to do this is to be active 30 minutes a day, at least 5 days a week.

### **What do I need to know about starting a walking program?**

Try to make a walk an essential part of your day. It's fine to walk for 10 minutes or more at a time throughout your day and week. Being active in small blocks of time throughout your day can be just as good as walking for a longer amount of time a few times a week. Accumulating activity throughout the day helps burn calories and maintain your weight.

Small activities such as taking the stairs instead of the elevator or parking far away and walking to your destination can add up quickly to the minimum recommendation of 2½ hours a week. Be creative. Instead of emailing or phoning a coworker, get up and walk to his or her desk. If you need to meet with someone, suggest taking a walk instead of staying inside.

To get the heart-healthy benefits of walking, you need to walk briskly enough to increase your pulse and breathing, but not so fast that you can't talk comfortably.

### **Why is walking good for my heart?**

Your heart is a muscle with fibers that allow it to contract and pump blood. When used during aerobic exercise, the heart becomes more efficient and pumps more blood with each heartbeat. Exercise, such as walking, also increases your muscles' ability to take oxygen from the blood. A more efficient heart can pump more blood with each heartbeat and deliver more oxygen and nutrients to other organs.

### **How can I stay motivated with a walking program?**

One of the best ways to stay motivated to walk is to include other people. Ask friends and coworkers to join you. Join a walking group or club.

- Buy a pedometer. Wear it every day and count your steps. The first time you wear it, count how many steps you normally take in a day. Set a goal for increasing it each day or

week. Try to start with an increase of 2,000 steps a day and work toward 10,000. Get others to join you and set goals as a group.

- Walk before or after work or on your lunch break. Instead of taking a snack or coffee break, take a walk break.
- If the weather is bad, take comfortable shoes to the mall and walk several laps inside.
- Walk to work, school, the grocery store, or a restaurant.
- Walk around your neighborhood, around an entire park, or to do errands.
- Schedule walks on your business calendar. Turn a walk into a brainstorming session with a coworker.
- Wear comfortable shoes and socks that cushion your feet.
- Drink plenty of water. Take a bottle with you when you walk.
- Be safe and know your surroundings. Walk in a well-lighted, safe place.
- Plan family outings around walks together.
- Take your dog on a walk.
- Set a goal to participate in an organized fitness walk.

### **Where to go from here**

Now that you have read this information, you are ready to plan a walking program that suits you.

### **Talk with your health professional**

If you have questions about this information, take it with you when you visit your health professional.