Walk your way to a happier, healthier you

**By Andrea Maehr, RN**

For years, jogging was my preferred method of exercise. Although I didn’t always like doing it, I liked the results. That is until I developed shin splints, a very painful condition that makes running impossible. Even with rest and long reprieves, the shin splints would return after only a few days of running. With that option off the table, I took up walking instead. As it turned out, I enjoyed walking a lot more, it was still extremely beneficial and I didn’t have any painful repercussions like shin splints.

“There are many reasons to walk for exercise,” says Ann Green, M.S., past heptathlon world athlete, yoga teacher and fitness studio owner. “Walking improves fitness, cardiac health, alleviates depression and fatigue, improves mood, creates less stress on joints and reduces pain, can prevent [weight gain](https://www.nbcnews.com/better/health/9-things-registered-dietitian-wants-you-know-about-weight-loss-ncna777231), reduce risk for cancer and chronic disease, improve endurance, circulation, and posture, and the list goes on…”

Studies have supported the notion that a daily walk can reduce the risk of stroke in both [men](http://stroke.ahajournals.org/content/early/2013/11/14/STROKEAHA.113.002246) and [women](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10865274), reduce the [days spent in a hospital](http://theconversation.com/new-study-shows-more-time-walking-means-less-time-in-hospital-71554) each year and can even [lower your risk of death by up to 39 percent](https://www.cancer.org/latest-news/study-shows-walking-an-hour-a-day-achieves-greatest-longevity-benefit.html) (when compared with no leisure-time physical activity).

While those are, obviously, all great reasons to adopt walking as part of your wellness routine, it doesn’t end there. Beyond the benefits to your body, walking provides profound benefits to your mind and soul, as well.

One [Stanford University study](https://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/xlm-a0036577.pdf) found walking increased creative output by an average of 60 percent. Researchers labelled this type of creativity “divergent thinking,” which they defined as a thought process used to generate creative ideas by exploring many possible solutions. According to the study, “walking opens up the free flow of ideas, and it is a simple and robust solution to the goals of increasing creativity and increasing physical activity.” Science shows [engaging in activities that allow our minds to wander](http://science.sciencemag.org/content/311/5763/1005.full) promotes a mental state conducive to innovative ideas and “ah-ha!” moments. I can attest to that fact, as many of my best ideas and insights come when walking in nature, while taking a shower, drying my hair or when my mind is at total rest while sleeping!

But it’s not only our creativity that benefits. The act of walking is also a proven mood booster. One [study](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/27100368) found that just 12 minutes of walking resulted in an increase in joviality, vigor, attentiveness and self-[confidence](https://www.nbcnews.com/better/health/why-you-should-stop-trying-be-more-confident-ncna778761) versus the same amount of time spent sitting. Specifically, walking in nature was found to reduce the tendency to ruminate over negative experiences – a habit that can raise the risk of depression.

One study, conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan, found that taking group nature walks is associated with a host of mental health benefits, including decreased depression, improved well-being and mental health, and lower perceived stress. And the positive effects on mood seemed to be especially strong among people who had recently experienced a traumatic life event, like a serious illness, death of a loved one or divorce.

Walking has also been shown to improve [memory](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17405620802535666?journalCode=pedp20) and prevent the [deterioration of brain tissue](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3039208/) as we age. Psychologists studying [how exercise relieves anxiety and depression](https://adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/managing-anxiety/exercise-stress-and-anxiety) suggest that a 10-minute walk may be just as good as a 45-minute workout when it comes to relieving the symptoms of anxiety and boosting mood.

While walking on a treadmill in your home or at the gym has its benefits, you are missing out if you are not walking outdoors. There is nothing like fresh air to clear your head, a daily dose of vitamin D from the sun and the pleasure of romping critters to entertain and distract you. Not only that, but oftentimes when you go to the gym and get on a treadmill, your attention is on a television broadcasting negative news, which does nothing to relieve anxiety, depression or stress. A [2013 British study](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/29/green-space-meditation-brain-walk-park_n_2964199.html) found that simply walking in green spaces can bring the brain into a state of meditation. Another study found walking or jogging outdoors makes people 50 percent happier than working out in a gym. With benefits like that, why wouldn’t you head outdoors?

Establishing a walking routine is easy and inexpensive. Most recommend 10,000 steps a day, preferably at a brisk pace, for the most benefit. A pedometer is a great investment that can help you count all those steps. Studies show counting steps, rather than miles, encourages walkers to go further. Wearing a pedometer all day can help bring awareness to how much walking you do (or don’t do) on a daily basis. All walking is beneficial in some fashion. The important thing is to just do it.

"Above all, do not lose your desire to walk," said Søren Kierkegaard, a 19th-century Danish philosopher. "Every day I walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness." More than 150 years later, millions of people are following in his footsteps. Will you be one of them?

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