



Ask the Expert with Dr. Darrell Menard

Find Answers to your Sport Medicine Questions!

Why Bother Walking? Is it Demanding Enough to Provide Real Benefits?

Q: *The last year of my life has been quite stressful and during this period I really haven't taken very good care of myself. I discussed my concerns with my physician and one of the changes she recommended was walking 45 minutes/day. I really want to get a better grip on my life and I am concerned that walking isn't demanding enough to provide any real benefits. Anonymous*

A: Dear Anonymous – Great to hear that you are working hard to make your life better. You are not alone in your concerns about walking. Many people consider walking such an ordinary thing to do that they often fail to recognize what an amazing form of exercise it truly is. It can literally be done nearly anywhere, any time and in any outfit. The following are a few good reasons you might want to make walking a regular part of your wellness plan:

- Walking is very good for your brain. Studies have shown a brisk walk is as effective as antidepressant medications in the treatment of mild to moderate depression. Research has also shown that walking only 6 miles a week will reduce your risk of dementia.
- Walking is a low impact activity and so it is usually better tolerated by people who may have some wear and tear on their knee and hip joints. Actually, in these cases, regular low impact activity can help reduce the symptoms of osteoarthritis.
- You can significantly reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke by walking regularly. Walking not only puts your heart and lungs to work but it also helps to lower your blood pressure, lower your bad cholesterol and elevate your good cholesterol.
- Walking is a very versatile activity and can be made more challenging by going faster, hiking up and down hill, carrying hand weights, using walking poles, wearing a weighted vest or carrying a back pack. The beauty of these strategies is that you can make them progressively more demanding the fitter you get.
- Walking is an excellent way to commute to work – it not only saves you money on gas, parking, car maintenance and stress medications but in some big cities you will probably get to work faster than you would if you took your car.
- Walking around your neighbourhood is a great way to stay connected with your friends and community.
- Regular walking costs nothing to do and will reduce your risk of many diseases such as diabetes, osteoporosis, osteoarthritis and cancer. There is no medication on earth that can do all this.

Walking is an excellent way to burn calories and lose some weight. The faster and farther you walk the more calories you will burn. However, walking will also make you gain some muscle weight so your gains may not all show on the weight scale. Also, don't forget that improving your fitness will have a greater positive impact on your health than losing weight.

The bottom line is that while regular walking may not seem to be as sexy as running a marathon or doing a triathlon, it truly is one of the best investments you could possibly make in terms of your long term health and happiness. If you want to learn more about the benefits of regular exercise check out Dr, Mike Evan's excellent video called 23½ hours: <https://youtu.be/3F5Sly9JQao>

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Dr. Darrell Menard is the Surgeon General's specialist advisor in sport medicine. He has worked extensively with athletes from multiple sports and has covered Canadian teams competing at multiple games including the 2012 Olympics and the 2016 Paralympic games. These articles were originally published in the Canadian Forces Journal, the Maple Leaf.

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