Hippocrates once said, “Walking is man’s best medicine.” What a relatively simple and inexpensive “pill to take” to make such a big impact on maintaining and improving our health.

Dr. Mike Evans agrees with Hippocrates. As a professor of family medicine and public health at University of Toronto, and staff physician at St Michael’s Hospital, he presents the investigating he did to come to this conclusion in an entertaining and educational YouTube video called, “23 and ½ hours: What is the single best thing we can do for our health?” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aUaInS6HIGo) Here are some of the findings that convinced him.

Patients with knee arthritis who walked three times weekly “reduced their rates of pain and disability by 47%.” Patients at high risk for diabetes who walked and participated in other healthy lifestyle changes reduced their risk by 58%. According to a meta-analysis study (that is, one that reviewed a number of similar studies to compare their results), walking reduced anxiety by 48%. And walking is the number one treatment for improving sleep. The list goes on, with all data pointing toward walking as the single most effective factor for better health.

Dr. Steven Blair, a professor at the Arnold School of Public Health at University of South Carolina, concurs. He looked at attributable fractions. These are estimates of the number of deaths that could be avoided if a risk factor were eliminated. An example would be the fewer number of deaths if smokers were non-smokers. The factors included obesity, smoking, hypertension, high cholesterol, diabetes, and low fitness. Dr. Blair’s conclusion was that increasing physical activity level from being inactive had the greatest impact.

So what is the effective “dose” of physical activity, like walking? Dr. Steven Ball, Associate Professor of Nutrition and Exercise Physiology at University of Missouri puts it this way: “some is better than none; more is better than some; and too much is hard to get.” More specifically, the current recommendation for adults is 150 minutes per week of moderate aerobic activity or 75 minutes per week of vigorous aerobic activity. Moderate means that heart rate increases and breathing is heavier – the exerciser can still talk, but is unable to sing.
There are lots of ways to make this happen so find something that allows you to do what you enjoy in a way that motivates you to make it a habit – to do it regularly and continue being active for a lifetime.

The benefits of choosing walking to be active are many.

- Walking takes little equipment (comfortable shoes and clothes to move in)
- Walking can be done anywhere that is safe:
  - In the neighborhood
  - In a mall or large store
  - Around the house (outside or inside)
  - In place – in front of the TV, while on the phone, etc.

Walking can also help meet one’s social needs. Walking can be done alone, for a quiet, thoughtful time. One can walk in private to pound out the stresses of the day. Walking can also be done with others, to connect with friends or family. It can even be done with “man’s best friend.” In fact, Dr. Evans found that, “the data show 67% of dog walkers achieved 150 minute per week just with the dog walking.” He adds that, “A dog is a great walking coach!”

What better time than now to get off the couch or step away from the computer and (with or without a “walking coach”) go for a walk – do it for your health!

For more information on being more physically active to improve health or on any other topic contact me, Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition Specialist, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local MU Extension office.

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