

Walking: How Fast is Fast Enough?

Every step you take reduces your risk of age-related conditions like heart disease, type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, and reduced lung capacity. Walking can also reduce stress, control body weight and tone and tighten muscles which can relieve arthritis symptoms. "Walking is a great exercise for everyone to consider," says Susan Mills-Gray, nutrition & health specialist with MU Extension. "You don't need fancy or special clothing, just a quality, supportive, comfortable pair of shoes and you're ready to go!" she adds.

New research from the University of Colorado has found that walking three miles per hour expends the least amount of energy (calories). Calories required for walking are actually greater when you walk faster *or slower* than three miles per hour. A good rule of thumb to use: 2 miles per hour is about 67 steps per minutes, while 3 miles per hour is about 100 steps per minute, while it takes 152 steps a minute for 4 miles per hour. "If you want to lose weight, then it's best for you to walk slower, but walk longer and farther to burn calories," Mills-Gray says, "but if you're looking for a cardiovascular workout, then you need to walk faster but shorter distances with some hills added."

Most Americans average 2,000 to 3,000 steps day (about 1 to 1 ½ miles). But research shows that it takes 10,000 steps (about five miles) daily to ward off chronic disease and other health challenges. "Most of us overestimate how active we are everyday," Mills-Gray shares, "using a pedometer is an easy and objective way to know for sure how much you're moving. While 10,000 daily steps may sound daunting to many, try increasing your steps by 200-300 steps each day each week until you reach the 10,000 step goal. This will take some time, but the health rewards are major."

Get your doctor's okay before starting a walking program, especially if you are over 50 (or over 40 with a chronic disease). Also, warm up before your walk by stepping in place for a couple of minutes to raise your heart rate slowly. Once warmed up, do some light stretching of your legs and lower back. It's also a good idea to stretch your legs, back, hips and shoulders after walk is completed.

(Sources: Environmental Nutrition June 2009; University of California- Berkeley; NIH)