



## WHY WALK?

Walking is a popular physical activity for many people, with more than 145 million adults choosing to walk to reach their physical activity goals.<sup>1</sup> People generally can continue to enjoy walking as they age.<sup>2</sup> Walking is the preferred choice of physical activity for many people diagnosed with a serious mental illness.<sup>3</sup> Yet, it is important to seek guidance from a physician before starting any new physical activity or exercise program. If walking outdoors, it is also important to walk in a safe area.

### General Health and Wellness Benefits

There are many health benefits<sup>4</sup> for people who walk regularly, including improving medical conditions like diabetes; preventing cancer, heart attacks, and stroke; contributing to a longer life; and boosting overall well-being. For most people, walking is easy and inexpensive, and can help save money on transportation. Walking provides an opportunity to connect with others, either by walking with a companion or through greeting neighbors and passers-by.

### Benefits for People with Serious Mental Illnesses

Many people diagnosed with a serious mental illness also have health concerns. Research studies identify people in this group as being at risk of early death, obesity; and for medical problems like diabetes, heart disease, and breathing challenges.

Moderate physical activity, like walking, can benefit<sup>5</sup> physical health, reduce health risks, and improve a person's cognition (thinking), while decreasing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and even schizophrenia. Walking can help relieve or lessen stress.

Although most people can safely<sup>6</sup> initiate a walking program on their own, someone who has a physical health concern and/or has had physical limitations may benefit from the guidance and support offered by a structured walking program.

Walking is a reasonable and safe way to increase activity for people diagnosed with serious mental illnesses. Four research studies<sup>7</sup> showed some benefits of walking for people diagnosed with a serious mental illness. People in each study did continue walking over a number of weeks. Some studies supported people walking alone or in a group. Prompts or check-ins seemed to help remind and motivate people to walk. Pedometers and smartphone apps helped people to motivate themselves and track progress. Many reported walking to be beneficial for health and social support. Some achieved their walking goals and met guidelines for physical activity (described on the following page).



# GET STARTED!

A common recommendation for healthy exercise is “do whatever you are willing to do.” Any added desirable activity,<sup>8</sup> like walking, can be beneficial. Specific guidelines for how much a person should walk are described below. It is important to always check with a doctor before starting a walking program.

## Guidelines

The recommendation for moderate physical activity, which includes walking, is a minimum of 150 minutes/week,<sup>9</sup> or about 30 minutes each of 5 days/week. Some experts suggest that splitting that time is equally effective, such as taking three 10-minute walks instead of one 30-minute walk.

## Practical Strategies<sup>10</sup>

### ***Setting a Walking Goal***

Setting a walking goal means choosing an achievable target of a certain number of steps, a length of time per day or week, a specific distance to cover, or a place you want to reach. People are most successful when they choose a goal that matters to them.<sup>11</sup> Focusing on small and manageable changes is the best way to start. Choose a target date that is short-term, like weeks, not long-term, like a year. By focusing on a new goal for each month, a person can achieve “small wins.”<sup>12</sup> Each success makes the next success more likely.

For some individuals living with serious mental illness, the side effects of certain medications can impact both energy and ability associated with setting a walking goal. Some medications can lead to weight gain and obesity, and disrupt energy levels. It is important to address medication side effects with a provider to develop an achievable walking goal and create a doable plan.

### ***Making a Doable Plan***

Making a doable plan to achieve a walking goal involves breaking down a monthly goal into smaller weekly and daily actions,<sup>13</sup> for example. By anticipating challenges and barriers, like bad weather or coming down with a cold, a person can plan a back-up strategy to overcome them. Everyone has slips and skips. It is helpful to be forgiving, and use those setbacks to learn what works and, if needed, make a new goal or plan. Preferred routes vary. Some people like walk to a specific destination and back while others prefer walking a loop instead of retracing their steps. A walking plan might take into account tasks or chores you do each day, such as walking between several stores in a downtown area instead of making many trips. To initiate a new walking plan, it is always a good idea to seek out assistance from a provider.



## **Tracking Successes**

Tracking successes can be done with a pedometer, smart phone app, wearables, a paper walking log, or notes on a calendar. For people who use a pedometer or other step-counter, the recommendation often is to take 10,000 steps/day or 5 miles a day. This includes general wandering about, such as walking from the couch to the refrigerator and walking around the supermarket. Most people walk around 2,000-3,000 steps/day without realizing it. A brisk 30-minute walk would add 1 ½ to 2 miles (from 3,000 to 4,000 additional steps).

The advantage<sup>14</sup> of using a pedometer is that it's easy to set and achieve goals for small increases in daily steps that can lead to a big increase over time. With mobile apps and wearables, not only can walkers track their steps, but there can be increased motivation by joining friendly challenges with friends, family members, and coworkers. This can gamify walking goals, adding a level of fun and interaction.

## **Walking with Someone**

Walking with someone, like a friend or family member, can provide support<sup>15</sup> and motivation for walking. Having company can help prevent boredom. Joining a walking group or a mall-walking event can help someone stick to it. Planning a walk with others is a promise to them to be there and to do it, and is less likely to be broken than a promise made only to oneself.

## **Prevent Injury**

Be safe—it's best to avoid injuries that might get in the way of walking. Check with a doctor before starting a walking program. Choosing the right shoes can help. Well-fitting shoes with non-slip soles will be safer than dress shoes on most surfaces. It's a good idea to warm up and cool down by walking slowly at the beginning and end. Stretching after warming up or stretching to cool down can be helpful. It is important for each person to choose stretches that are safe and appropriate for any existing health concerns. While music, news, or a podcast may keep a walk interesting, using headphones while walking outdoors may make it difficult to hear traffic, other walkers, or an oncoming bicycle.

## **RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION AND SUPPORT**

[Overcoming Barriers to Physical Activity - from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: http://bit.ly/2gTUgl2](http://bit.ly/2gTUgl2)

[Step it Up! - from the Surgeon General: http://bit.ly/2wrJZLP](http://bit.ly/2wrJZLP)

[Walking: A Step in the Right Direction - from the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases: http://bit.ly/2s1LtXx](http://bit.ly/2s1LtXx)

[Walking for Your Health - from the National Institute on Aging at NIH: http://bit.ly/2pYRQO1](http://bit.ly/2pYRQO1)

[Why Walk? Why Not! - from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: http://bit.ly/2f5PYKI](http://bit.ly/2f5PYKI)

[Walking: Take the First Step - from the American Heart Association: http://bit.ly/1ozvVrd](http://bit.ly/1ozvVrd)

[Webwalking USA Walking Program - from Verywell Fit: http://bit.ly/2Ebu4BS](http://bit.ly/2Ebu4BS)

[Walking Fact Sheet - from Sports Medicine Australia: http://bit.ly/2Bg1PmA](http://bit.ly/2Bg1PmA)

SAMHSA's Program to Achieve Wellness | paw@prainc.com



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