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Walking a little can go a long way

- Story Highlights
- Walking every day brings many health benefits
- A brisk walk in the afternoon will help you get a better night's sleep, experts say
- You can significantly reduce breast-cancer risk by walking, one study says
- Walking may help ward off Alzheimer's disease, studies say

By Lambeth Hochwald

What if there was something simple you could do every day that would burn calories, be good for your heart, and help you stay young. You'd do it, right?

Well, that's why researchers and doctors are so gung ho about walking, especially in light of new research that credits it for everything from cutting breast-cancer risks to helping you sleep.

Walking is not just a weenie activity for the nonathletic, says Michelle Look, M.D., national medical consultant to the Breast Cancer 3-Day Walk and a physician who specializes in sports medicine in San Diego, California: "It's good for just about anybody, and the health benefits are particularly significant for women." Here, eight reasons to start walking -- or just walk a little more often. [Health.com: Sneak more walking into your life](#)

1. It's great for the heart

In a recent study conducted at Duke University Medical Center, researchers found that walking briskly for 30 minutes every day lowers your odds of developing metabolic syndrome, a cluster of risk factors linked to higher risks of heart disease, diabetes, and stroke. Roughly 24 million women in the United States have metabolic syndrome. Don't have time for a daily half-hour walk? Try multitasking: A British study found that active commuting (incorporating walking and cycling into your sedentary commute) is associated with an 11 percent reduction in heart-disease risk, especially among women.

2. It cuts breast-cancer risks

Walking, even for a few hours a week, significantly reduces breast-cancer risk, according to a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association. The thinking is that walking helps reduce levels of body fat, a source of estrogen. The research looked at 74,000 postmenopausal women between the ages of 50 and 79. Those at a normal weight lowered their risk by 30 percent; those who were overweight, by 10 to 20 percent. Younger women may also gain similar benefits.

3. It helps you sleep

A brisk walk in the afternoon will help you get a better night's sleep, according to the National Sleep Foundation. Experts say that walking may boost levels of the feel-good hormone serotonin, which relaxes you. Or, the rise in body temperature brought on by walking may signal the brain to lower your temperature later, which promotes sleep. (Avoid a walk two hours before bed --that's too late to cool down.)

4. It cuts down on aches and pains

Walk the "Chi" (pronounced chee) way and you could have fewer achy days. Nine years ago, Danny Dreyer, an ultra-marathoner then living near San Francisco, California, invented ChiWalking, which incorporates ideas from Tai Chi, yoga, and Pilates. It looks like regular walking but, because you consciously relax, improve the alignment of your body, and involve arm movements, puts less stress on the legs while you walk. That means fewer aches. "ChiWalking can cut down any risk of injury," says Alice Peters Diffely, a ChiWalking instructor in Portland, Oregon. "Your whole body will feel better."

5. It makes you happy

Walking can relieve depression, anxiety, and stress. Just one 30-minute walk may make you feel better when you're down, University of Texas researchers found. Head out for 90 minutes five times a week and you'll get the biggest boost, according to a new study from Temple University. One possible explanation: Walking helps the body produce endorphins, the mood-boosting chemicals linked to "runner's high." [Health.com: Get the most out of your walk](#)

6. It keeps you slimmer

Walking for 30 minutes a day can prevent weight gain in most people who are physically inactive, according to another Duke study. And researchers from Brown University and the University of Pittsburgh showed that women who walked for an hour five days a week and consumed 1,500 calories a day lost and kept off 25 pounds over the course of a year. The reason walking helps control your weight: It's easy! "The harder the exercise is, the less people will do it," says Johnny Benjamin, MD, chairman of the department of orthopedics at Indian River Medical Center in Vero Beach, Florida. [Health.com: How one woman lost 45 pounds by walking with friends](#)

7. It staves off senior moments

Several studies in older people suggest that walking -- even for as little as 45 minutes a week -- helps ward off Alzheimer's disease. Regular strolls are also linked to mental sharpness in seniors. But regardless of your age, walking is likely to help keep your mind active, Benjamin says--particularly if you stroll with friends; walking while talking is a surefire brain booster.

8. It protects your bones

Just 30 minutes of walking three times a week does wonders to prevent and treat thinning bones. This kind of exercise, which uses 95 percent of your muscles, actually pushes your bones to get stronger so they can handle the load. "Walking," Look says, "is not just for cardio."

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