

Best foot forward

If you have arthritis, walking might be something you avoid at all costs.

Juliet Stephens finds out why walking is actually good for you

Filling the lungs with fresh air, getting the joints and muscles moving and the blood circulating, walking has got to be good for you. If you have arthritis, walking is a gentle way of tackling the pain and reducing stiffness. Not only does it get you out of the house, it is a great way to meet people too – whether you join a walking group, or strike up conversation with passers by.

‘I’m absolutely sure that walking is good for the joints,’ says Gordon Blyth, who has rheumatoid arthritis (RA). ‘It’s definitely helping me; I stiffen up when I’m not able to move.’

‘Walking boosts normal fitness levels, helps to build up confidence and stamina and strengthens the muscles, which in turn protect the joints,’ enthuses Anne Chadwick, physiotherapist and lecturer in physiotherapy at Keele University. ‘It is also one of the best ways to lose weight, in tandem with a healthy eating program.’

Walking not only has physical benefits, but, as with any cardiovascular exercise, it releases endorphins, which are the feel-good chemicals in the brain, so it is good for the mind as well as the body.

Some would go further and say that walking is also good for the soul. ‘It takes your mind off things,’ says Christine Miles, who also has RA. ‘It’s meditative. I walk in silence, taking in the nature around me. I watch the seasons change, and enjoy the birds, flowers, the plants and breeze, it really is fantastic.’

There is also a social dimension to walking. Walking with family or friends is an excellent excuse to get out there. Christine explains that walking has always been a part of her life, and how she prefers

to be in the great outdoors than just sit in with a cup of tea: ‘Since I was diagnosed with RA I walk much slower than before, but my friends have adapted and walk at my pace.’

Walking is great cardiovascular exercise, as it stimulates the heart and lungs. ‘It is great for the muscles. The heart is the most important muscle in the body, so it’s important to keep it in shape,’ says Anne.

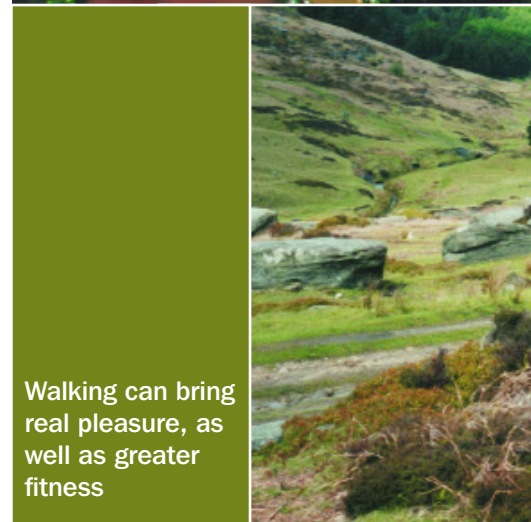
Katriona Macklin, a podiatrist, agrees: ‘Walking gets blood flowing around the body. The calf muscle is one of the main pumps in the body, pushing blood back up to the heart. If this isn’t active regularly, swelling around the ankle joint will increase – this can exacerbate the arthritis.’

By walking, I can help minimise my pain

What usually prevents people with arthritis from doing exercise is, quite simply, the pain. ‘It’s a natural reaction to stop moving when you’re in pain,’ says Anne. ‘But this makes you stiffen up; it’s a vicious circle.’

Physical pain associated with walking is obviously a significant hurdle, but equally significant are fear, frustration and depression. ‘After I was diagnosed I’d have days when I just couldn’t walk at all, I’d just stay in the house and hide away,’ Christine remembers. She says a crucial turning point for her was recognising that although it was difficult to walk one week, it would be easier the next.

Finding the motivation to make the effort to build yourself up is half the battle. Cathy Bennett has had lumbar and cervical



Walking can bring real pleasure, as well as greater fitness

spondylosis since she was nine years old. She has a treadmill at home, and uses a pedometer to count the number of steps she takes in a day, to encourage her to walk more. ‘My condition gets me down, and by walking I can help to at least minimise my pain a bit,’ she says.

Getting enthusiastic about walking is entirely personal. Jean Sutherland, like many others maintains the importance of, ‘being the master of your arthritis, not the other way round.’ For others, like Gordon, going hillwalking was a passion before he was diagnosed, so for him it is about maintaining independence. ‘It’s second nature to me, I’m so aware of the benefits,’



photo: Creatas



he says. 'I try to encourage other people to get out and walk, and that encourages me at the same time.'

Discipline and focus are very important, and striking the right balance between exercise and rest can be very difficult. Physiotherapist Chris Keevil says: 'If you are still in pain an hour after exercise then you have probably pushed yourself too far, so take it easy for a while.'

One of the joys about walking is that it can be done anywhere: to the shops, to church, in forests, wherever. Ideally soft terrain, like woodland floor, is best, though it shouldn't be too marshy. Equally tarmac isn't perfect because it's so hard – even ground is the safest option.

It's important to build up your stamina

Podiatrist Katriona Macklin, emphasises the importance of muscle flexibility when you are walking. 'If the muscles, especially the calf muscles, are too tight, it increases pressure on the foot joints,' she says.

Warming up before walking is, therefore, very important, even some very gentle stretches from the comfort of your armchair. 'Try just lifting your knee gently up towards your chest, or raising your calf so your foot is straight out from your knee,' says Anne Chadwick.

Numerous aids, sticks and gadgets are available if you need a bit of assistance. Correct footwear is essential. Insoles can be bought off-the-shelf or custom-made for you by a podiatrist.

Shoes should be strong and supportive – ideally a casual walking shoe. 'You need something that will anchor your foot in the shoe,' says Katriona. Lace up shoes, or shoes that are secured on top with a velcro strap, are the best, most secure footwear.

Walking, especially when there is pain, can be a real chore, but the health benefits are undeniable. 'It's important to focus on building your stamina and strength up,' says Chris Keevil. 'Start with walking even for a few minutes and practise as regularly as you can, and you'll notice an improvement.'


Psychologically, you should reap the benefits too once you are more practiced at walking and therefore more confident when you are out and about.

The social aspect of walking shouldn't be forgotten. There are plenty of walking groups across the UK, some are aimed specifically at disabled people. If you are thinking of joining one, ask about the level of fitness expected and the distances they cover. Make sure you tell them about your own needs, and speak up if you are finding the going tough.

In a bid to encourage people, especially infrequent exercisers, to walk more, the Walking the Way to Health initiatives have been launched across the UK. 'It's about teaching people that you don't have to go far away, you can just walk from your front door,' says Eileen Mulroy, a development officer for Paths to Health, as the initiative is known in Scotland.

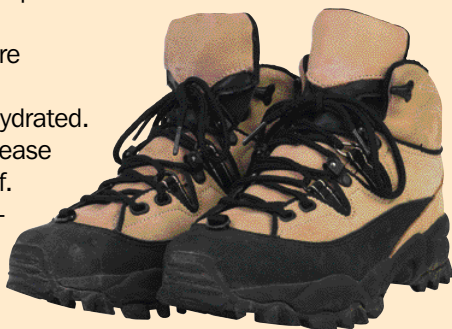
The walks are free, and have huge rewards. 'The social element is as, if not more important than the physical health benefits,' says Christine White, administrator for Walking the Way to Health in south west England. 'Most walks start or end at a cafe, so people can have a cup of tea. It creates a social network, so people who perhaps don't get out very much can make friends and have fun.'

People can sometimes surprise themselves with their sense of achievement. 'It's great to see people empowered,' says Liz Barnes, who has osteoarthritis and is a scheme initiator and trainer for Gwent.

She has done many walks with people unused to exercise. 'We chat on the walks, and we wear name badges so we all get to know each other. There's absolutely no pressure to go fast, just physical, mental and social enjoyment.' 

Safe steps to walking

- Talk to your GP or, ideally a physiotherapist, for advice on how to embark on a walking programme.
- A podiatrist or physiotherapist can give practical advice on shoes, supports and insoles.
- Wear lightweight clothing so that you're comfortable and unrestricted.
- Carry a small bottle of water to stay hydrated.
- Be aware of your limitations, and increase your endurance slowly – pace yourself.
- It's good to have equipment, like fold-out stools, in case you need to rest.
- Learning what will or won't work for you can be an individual science.



Walking organisations in the UK

Walking the Way to Health Initiative

Tel: 01242 533258.

www.whi.org.uk

Disabled Ramblers

www.disabledramblers.co.uk

Ramblers Association

Tel: 020 7339 8500.

www.ramblers.org.uk