

# Stepping Out



**Mature Adults:  
Be Healthy, Walk Safely**

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## **Mature Adults: Be Healthy, Walk Safely**

This booklet will tell you how to maintain your safety while walking - whether you are walking for exercise or to run errands. It provides:

- A quick refresher on the health benefits of walking.
- Resources for getting started and planning what level of activity is best for you.
- Ideas for incorporating walking into your everyday schedule *and* staying motivated to continue walking.
- Tips for staying safe at intersections, in parking lots, in non-sidewalk areas, and in bad weather.
- Suggestions for making your community a safer place to walk.

But first, it will give you some helpful hints and reasons for starting and maintaining a walking program.



# Out



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## How Do I Maintain My Physical Independence?

Walking is not only a healthy activity and an alternative to driving, but also a great way to maintain a healthy lifestyle. But for many of us, the automobile has made it too easy to lead a sedentary lifestyle. “Why walk when it is so much easier to ride there quickly and comfortably?” Indeed, this notion is so widespread that 59 percent of older Americans do not walk or exercise regularly.

Walking is a form of transportation that also has the added benefit of being a healthy activity. Because walking is second nature to us, we forget that it is not only good exercise, it also enables us to get where we need to go under our own steam, without having to rely on a vehicle.

By substituting walking for driving, when practical, older adults can extend the number of years they are able to drive. Medical experts warn that a lack of regular physical activity and the effects of natural aging lead to a 20 to 40 percent muscle loss. With that amount of muscle loss, you could have difficulty walking, getting out of a chair, and driving. Doctors also tell us it is never too late to start an exercise program; even people in their 90s can benefit from walking several times a week.



## What barriers keep people from walking?

- Lack of time
- Isolation, depression, and current weight
- Poor vision
- Fear that the exercise could cause injury
- Fear for one's personal safety
- Illness or disability
- Side effects of medication
- Lack of exercise equipment
- Lack of energy or simply don't like to exercise

If you can identify with any of these issues, you are not alone. But help is available. This booklet provides information that can help you get started safely on a walking program.



## How Much Time Do I Need To Invest?

The good news is that it only takes three to four hours of walking each week to show significant physical improvement. Research suggests that even light to moderate exercise, if done consistently, can slow the effects of aging, reduce stress, improve stamina, and enhance mental and physical health. Novice walkers are rewarded within the first month, while some experienced walkers report that their health is better than the average 40 year old.

## What Are The Keys To Staying Fit?

Maintaining or increasing your *strength*, *endurance*, *balance*, and *flexibility* are the key factors to staying fit. Walking builds your strength and endurance, which contributes to better balance. You can improve your flexibility with stretching exercises designed specifically for older adults.<sup>1</sup> By striving to increase all four factors, you lower your risk of injury and slow the aging process in your joints and muscles.

For some, walking 30 minutes a day may be difficult. If so, experts suggest walking 10 minutes at a time, three times a day. As your health improves, you can combine two of the three smaller walks into a 20-minute walk, and then advance to a single 30-minute walk. As your daily walk becomes easier, try to include new challenges, such as climbing a hill, extending the time you walk, increasing your walking pace, or adding an additional day of walking.

<sup>1</sup> Those already diagnosed with osteoporosis should see their physician before attempting any stretching exercises. Some stretches that are good for others may not be good for you.

## The Positive Health Rewards From Walking

While any physical activity is good, only frequent exercise brings lasting results. The results you gain from an activity will fade dramatically after two weeks, and completely disappear after two to eight months if that activity is not continued.<sup>2</sup> Doctors say that people who walk regularly can often attain better long-term health and suffer fewer injuries than someone who exercises more vigorously because walking has minimal impact on your bones and joints.



## The long-term health benefits from walking include:

- **Lower blood pressure.** Exercise causes blood vessels to dilate, which reduces the pressure on blood vessel walls. Decreased pressure lowers the chance of a blood vessel rupturing in the brain, thus lowering the risk for a stroke.
- **Lower cholesterol.** Exercise lowers your cholesterol level, which decreases the risk to your heart.
- **Strengthened heart and cardiovascular system.** The elevated heart rate you get from walking will help lower your heart rate when you rest. A strengthened heart and cardiovascular system also lowers the risk of coronary disease and heart attack.
- **Increased bone density.** As density increases, the risk of osteoporosis and bone fractures decreases. Weight bearing exercise, such as walking, is especially important for women battling osteoporosis.
- **Production of growth hormones that counteract the effects of aging.** As you grow older, your body stops producing hormones that help keep muscles strong. Therefore, regular exercise is the only natural way to get the body to continue to produce these hormones.
- **Increased production of endorphins (en-dor-fins) improves mental and physical health.** Endorphins are the body's natural way to decrease stress, helping you to relax. Forty minutes of walking three to four times a week can reduce depression and anxiety. As a result of endorphin release, people often find they feel better and sleep more soundly.



- **Weight loss or weight maintenance.** Studies have shown that walking regularly can help you lose weight, and keep unwanted pounds from returning. Depending on your pace, a one-mile walk burns approximately 100 calories for a person of average weight, and perhaps more for a heavier person (up to 300 calories per hour).
- **Strengthened nervous system and reflexes.** When your body moves, the brain sends “messages” to your muscles that tell the muscle how to work. Those messages must be passed frequently so that the nervous system continues to function, improving your reflexes.
- **Increased flexibility.** Walking and stretching increase overall flexibility and make daily activities, such as climbing stairs, walking across the street, and driving a car, easier and safer. Flexibility will help you maintain physical independence and may even help you extend the number of years you will be able to drive.

### Do You Still Have Stiff Joints And Muscles?

**Stiffness might make it harder to check for traffic as you walk.**

**TIP:** Turn your whole body, not just your neck, when scanning for traffic. As your flexibility increases, so will your ability to be safe.

- **Balanced insulin production.** For diabetics, exercise increases the production of insulin, which helps combat the high blood sugar of diabetes. For non-diabetics, exercise may also prevent the onset of diabetes.

Many older adults who walk regularly believe that exercise has reshaped their lives. A fifty-nine year old woman, who is a cancer survivor, said it best: “Walking gives me the energy and stamina that I need to go out and actualize my dreams. I recently started teaching high school and completed a walking trip in Italy. It’s just plain easier for me to move my arthritic body out of bed in the morning when I am in shape. I miss how I feel if I go a week without walking.”



## How Does Walking Fit My Lifestyle?

Starting an exercise routine is difficult for many of us. The first step, though, is to identify how walking fits into your lifestyle. The Surgeon General reported that individuals are more likely to stick with a regular exercise schedule if they believe that an activity:

- Is beneficial
- Is enjoyable
- Can be done safely
- Can be done correctly
- Can be done regularly
- Can fit into their current schedule
- Will not result in increased social or financial costs
- Has few negative consequences (for example, injury or lost time)

Only you can decide if walking is best for your fitness plan. As with any form of exercise, if you have physical conditions that put you at risk<sup>3</sup> or if you are a male older than 40 or a female older than 50, consult your doctor before starting.



<sup>3</sup> "At risk" is defined as anyone who has a pre-existing physical condition or previous injury for which he or she has been seen by a doctor or is currently under medical supervision/medication.

## Locating Expert Exercise Advisors

Finding a qualified professional to give you advice is easier than you might think. Start with your doctor. In addition, there are other medical professionals who can tell you what types of walking or stretching would be best for you, including:

- Doctors who specialize in sports medicine
- Licensed physical therapists
- Fitness instructors certified by the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) to work with older adults

**If you need assistance locating a qualified professional, the following groups might be able to provide a referral:**

- Your local hospital's preventive health maintenance or exercise program
- Your Health Maintenance Organization's (HMO's) wellness center
- Local colleges and universities that hold exercise classes for older adults
- Your local parks and recreation department

## How Do I Stay Motivated?

Maintaining a regular exercise routine can be just as difficult as starting one. Veteran walkers and exercise specialists suggest following these tips for staying motivated:

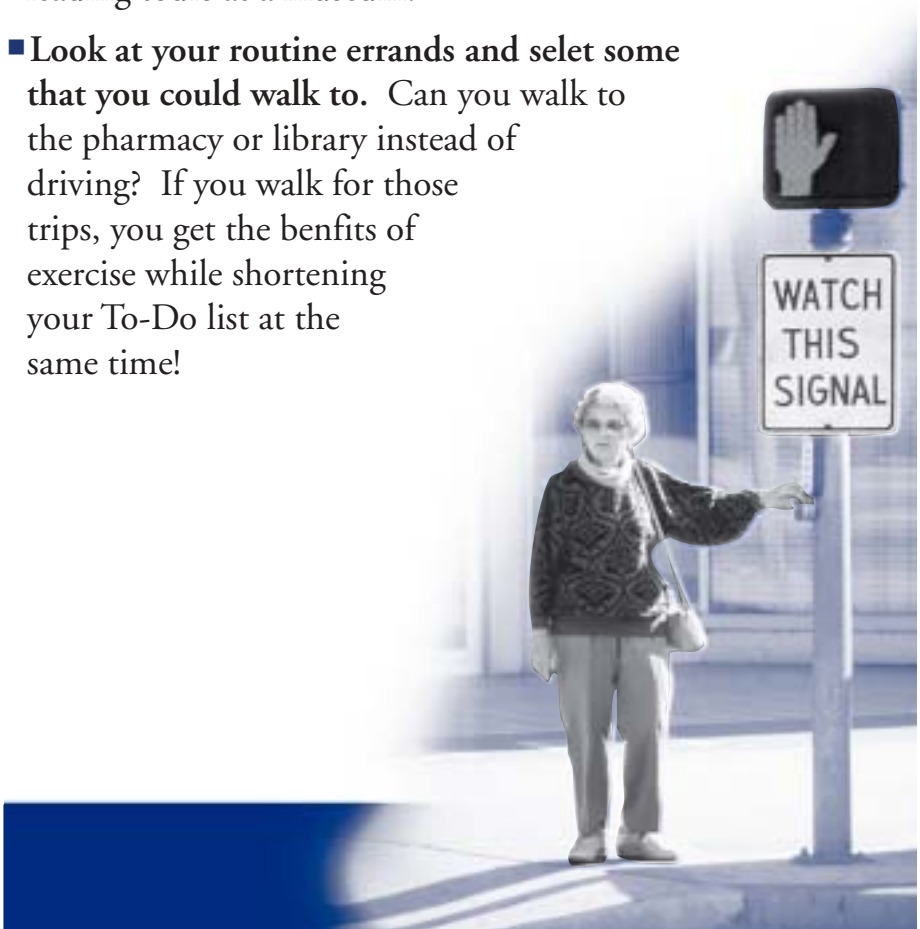
- **Treat your walking time as an appointment you make with yourself.** Remember that the consequences of missing that appointment may mean less independence in the future.
- **Track your progress.** Record improvements in time, distance, and flexibility by measuring your progress on a weekly or monthly basis. For example, if your goal is increased stamina, measure how far you can walk in 30 minutes. You'll see the greatest improvement during the first month, so track your progress on a weekly basis at the start of your walking program.



- **Include new but reachable goals to keep building your fitness level.** If your fitness level stays the same for an extended period, add a new challenge. For example: “I can walk along flat ground easily. I would like to be able to do a hike up hills with my grandkids.” So, your new goal may be to include hills in your walking program (if your doctor has said this is all right).
- **Write down the reasons you decided walking is worthwhile.** Put these reasons at the top of your progress sheet and review them as you record your progress. Update when necessary.



- **Join a walking group.** When other people are walking with you, it can be easier to keep an exercise commitment. Walking with others also gives you a chance to catch up with friends.
- **Have alternative walking places in mind to use during inclement weather.** Walking inside a shopping mall or a public building is better than walking outdoors in slick or snowy conditions (a walking stick can be helpful in slick conditions if you walk outside).
- **Combine your interests with walking.** Sign up for a volunteer activity that includes walking, such as leading tours at a museum.
- **Look at your routine errands and select some that you could walk to.** Can you walk to the pharmacy or library instead of driving? If you walk for those trips, you get the benefits of exercise while shortening your To-Do list at the same time!



## Getting Started Safely

Because walking is such a routine part of everyday life, many people do not consider the safety aspects of walking. For instance, most injuries to walkers happen when a vehicle hits them because the driver could not see the walker or the walker and driver were not paying close enough attention.

The key to remember is to **See And Be Seen**. It is a good idea when walking, especially at dawn, dusk, and other low-light conditions, to wear light colors or bright clothing so that you can be easily seen. Fluorescent colors such as blaze orange, hot pink, and day-glow green are ideal in daytime but not at nighttime.





To See And Be Seen, keep in mind that:

- **Walkers are especially at risk during winter.** The lower angle of the winter sun increases the shadows cast by buildings and trees. Decreased daylight, shadows, and nightfall make it difficult to see walkers wearing dark or non-reflective clothing.
- **Dress to be seen by drivers.** If you walk at night, remember that wearing white clothing does not guarantee drivers can see you. When walking at night, use a flashlight to make yourself more visible to drivers and to help light your path. It is also a good idea to wear reflective or retroreflective materials, which give off light when headlights shine on them and can be seen by drivers three times farther than white. Many stores sell walking shoes, jackets, and safety sports equipment featuring retroreflective material. Although retroreflective materials are more effective than reflective materials, both are ineffective in daytime.



## Here are some other safety tips for walkers:

- **Wear sturdy shoes that will give you proper footing.** A running or walking shoe that supports your foot from side to side is best.
- **Use paths and sidewalks whenever available.** If you must walk on or near a road, remember to walk facing oncoming traffic, so that both you and the driver can see each other. If there's a smooth stable surface alongside the roadway, that's also a good place to walk—just stay as far to the side as possible and look for oncoming traffic.
- **Cars and other objects can obscure a driver's view.** Cars, buses, hedges, or mounds of snow can block a driver's view. Even if a driver has stopped to let you cross the street, don't blindly accept the driver's offer because there may be another vehicle in the next lane overtaking the stopped vehicle. And the second driver can't see you because of the stopped vehicle.
- **Plan routes to avoid hazardous crossings.** The safest crossing points will have:
  - (1) enough room for you to stand back from the roadway,
  - (2) crosswalks that are clearly defined on the pavement, and
  - (3) crossing signals that indicate when you should cross.Wide avenues that require pedestrians to cross in phases should have an island where you can stand until the next “fresh green” (a fresh green is the newly changed green light on the traffic signal in front of you as you stand facing the direction you want to cross) or walk signal phase.



- **Stop and look for traffic in all directions before crossing the street, and look to the left, right, and left again—even on a one-way street.** And always look left last because that is the direction that cars will be coming from when you first step off the curb.
- **Don't rely only on traffic signs and signals.** Assuming that a signal will stop traffic puts you at risk. You must look for traffic even if you are in a crosswalk and you are crossing with the light or with the walk signal. A driver who does not see or obey a sign or signal may also not be paying enough attention to see you.
- **Allow plenty of time to cross streets.** If you're not sure how long a signal gives you to cross, observe one light cycle so you'll know how much time you have. If the signal does not provide enough time, find another place to cross the street. Otherwise, cross the street when you get a “fresh green.”

■ **Intersections are especially difficult for older pedestrians.**

You are most at risk when first stepping off the curb, because drivers may not see you until you're actually in the roadway. Always stop at the curb and look left, right, then left again for cars before entering the roadway. Don't assume the drivers see you unless they signal for you to cross.

■ **Turning vehicles can be especially dangerous at intersections.**

Drivers are concentrating on making their turns and avoiding oncoming traffic, so they might not see you! Exaggerate your head turns so that you look in all directions, including behind you. Make sure you look for vehicles making right turns on red and for vehicles making left turns. Always make sure the driver of a vehicle that is turning sees you.



- **Understand crosswalk signals.** To make learning crosswalk signals easier, let's compare them to the traffic lights we use when driving.



The steady DON'T WALK signal is like the red light, it means that you should stop at the curb and wait for the next WALK signal or green light.



The flashing DON'T WALK signal, like the yellow caution light, means that you shouldn't start to cross the street. However, if you are in the street when the signal begins flashing, don't stop or return to the curb. Continue to walk as fast as you can, comfortably, until you reach the other side or a pedestrian island.



The WALK signal, like the green light, does not mean that it is safe for you to start crossing without looking. It is best, even on a WALK signal, to check traffic for turning vehicles or oncoming cars. Before crossing at an intersection, you may want to wait for a "fresh green" light because it will give you the most crossing time. If there is a push button, press the button and wait for the WALK signal to come on.



Some areas are using a new WALK signal that counts down the seconds remaining for you to cross the intersection safely. When the seconds run out, a steady DON'T WALK light will come on because the traffic light is about to change.

- **Walk with a friend.** Walking with a friend will add to the pleasure of your walk and increase your safety as well, as long as you are watching out for each other. Enjoy your conversation, but don't let it distract you from watching out for road and traffic hazards as you walk.
- **Be especially careful in parking lots.** Parking lots create special hazards because cars may be turning quickly or backing out of a parking space. Be sure to **look** for backup lights and **listen** for engine noise.
- **Wait for a “fresh green” when crossing at signals.** Don't start to cross the street unless the traffic signal has just turned green. By waiting for a fresh green, you allow yourself the most time to cross the intersection safely.

## What Are The Safety Considerations As I Get Older?

As adults age, gradual losses in their hearing, vision, reflexes, and flexibility put older pedestrians at risk. For instance, stiff joints may make it harder to turn your head, neck, and shoulders and you may not see vehicles that are turning or backing up. So, turn your whole body, not just your neck, when looking for traffic.

## What If There Are No Safe Places To Walk?

As a result of legislation passed in the 1990s, each state must employ a Pedestrian Coordinator whose job it is to ensure that communities are more pedestrian friendly. Also, many associations and community groups have prepared materials to help bring about change to make communities a better place to walk.

**There are many steps you can take to improve the “walkability” of your community:**

- Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper
- Contact your Mayor or a City Council member and ask for a Walkable Community Program
- Ask local police to increase enforcement of speed limits in neighborhoods
- Join a citizen’s committee
- Survey the routes you use regularly and contact your Department of Public Works if sidewalks, signals, and signs need to be improved

Whatever your age, remember it is not too late to reverse the effects of time. Walking is a good place to start, giving you increased strength and stamina to help you get greater enjoyment out of life.

## Resources

The following resources can provide information about local groups involved in pedestrian advocacy and planning in your area:

- **National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA)**  
Office of Program Development and Delivery  
<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/People/injury/Pedbimot/Ped>

- **Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center**  
<http://www.walkinginfo.org>  
Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center  
730 Airport Road, Suite 30  
Campus Box 3430  
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3430  
Tel: (919) 962-2203  
Toll Free: 1-877-925-5245







### ■ **Federal Highway Administration**

Office of Human Environment and Planning  
Environment/Bike and Pedestrian Programs

<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bikeped/bipedcor.htm>

Tel: (202) 366-5007

### ■ **Local Department of Transportation**

Pedestrian Coordinator


<http://www.safety.fhwa.dot.gov/roadshow/walk/resource/psrdm109.htm>

### ■ **Walkable Communities**

Information and presentations on making your  
community pedestrian safe and accessible

Email: [walkable@aol.com](mailto:walkable@aol.com)

Tel: (386) 454-3304



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U.S. Department  
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