

Older Adults Say Cash Might Motivate Them to Walk

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(PhysOrg.com) -- In 2006, a team of researchers set out to examine what sorts of walking programs and incentives might induce sedentary people over age 50 to put on their sneakers. They found that small cash payments might just provide that extra push.

A survey asked 501 inactive adults to state their preferences regarding how long they would walk, and whether they would ambulate alone or in a group, if they had to make a choice.

Participants most often selected three solitary, 20-minute walks per week. In addition, by adding a theoretical offer of \$9 a week, researchers upped the regimen's enthusiasts by 31 percent.

“A number of exercise programs are structured around group activity,” said Derek Brown, Ph.D., lead study author. “This was not preferred by most. We did find, though, that money would increase participation. Also, people were more receptive to walking three days a week, rather than more or fewer days. The idea that it takes three days a week to gain sufficient benefits from physical activity seems to be ingrained.”

Brown is an economist with the Public Health Economics Program at RTI International, based in North Carolina. The study appears in the March issue of the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

He pointed out that one hour of activity per week does not meet government health standards of 30 minutes, five days a week for

moderate intensity activity such as walking. In the study, sedentary and inactive adults wanted \$36.30 per week to do this much exercise. If they had to go in a group, they wanted nearly twice as much more.

Brian Martinson, Ph.D., a senior research investigator with HealthPartners Research Foundation in Minneapolis, had reservations about the study's hypothetical nature.

“No one was paying them,” said Martinson, who has no affiliation with the study. “Given the value we Americans place on our autonomy and independence, I was not surprised that people didn’t want to walk in structured groups. The \$36 a week to meet government goals was discouraging. More nuanced ways of offering incentives, such as having people ‘front’ their own cash with promise of returns if staying active, have recently been shown to be more cost-effective.”

Provided by American Journal of Preventive Medicine

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