

Walking groups come out trumps for boosting overall health without side effects

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Credit: Vera Kratochvil/public domain

Risk of stroke, coronary heart disease, depression and other life-threatening conditions can be reduced through regular outdoor walking in groups, according to research from the University of East Anglia (UEA).

Findings published today in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* reveal

that people who regularly walk in groups have lower blood pressure, resting heart rate and total cholesterol.

The exercise also leads to a reduction in body fat and Body Mass Index (BMI).

In England, at least 29 per cent of adults do less than 30 minutes of moderate physical activity every week. Almost one in 10 don't manage to walk for more than five minutes at a time over a month.

Researchers say the findings point to a cost-effective and low-risk way of enhancing overall health. Doctors should recommend joining a walking group as a way of boosting health, researchers added.

The study was led by Sarah Hanson and Prof Andy Jones of UEA's Norwich Medical School.

Sarah Hanson said: "Our research shows that joining a walking group is one of the best and easiest ways to boost overall health. The benefits are wide ranging - and they go above and beyond making people more physically active. What's more, people find it relatively easy to stick with this type of exercise regime.

"The merits of walking - including lowering the recurrence of some cancers - are well known, but these findings show that the dynamics and social cohesion of walking in groups may produce additional advantages.

"People who walk in groups also tend to have a more positive attitude toward physical activity, a shared experience of wellness, and say they feel less lonely and isolated. Taking regular walks can also be a catalyst for adopting other healthy behaviours.

"The research evidence suggests people enjoy attending walking groups

and appear less likely to drop out than many other forms of activity.

"Walking is safe and walking groups could provide a valuable line of treatment, with a potential for both physiological and psychological health benefits," she added.

The team reviewed 42 studies that looked at:

- 1,843 participants in 14 countries
- A total of 74,000 hours of group walking
- Included people with obesity, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, fibromyalgia, Parkinson's disease, as well as healthy participants

Key findings:

- People who joined walking groups registered statistically significant falls in average blood pressure, resting heart rate, body fat, weight, and total cholesterol.
- Walkers also experienced improvements in lung power, overall physical functioning, and general fitness, and they were less depressed than before they started walking regularly.
- Evidence was less clear-cut for reductions in other risk factors for ill health, such as waist circumference, fasting blood glucose and blood fats.
- Three-quarters of all participants stuck with the group, and there were few side effects, apart from a handful of falls on roots or wet ground, and minor injuries such as calf strain.

Hanson said: "These findings may provide clinicians with evidence of a further effective option to recommend to those patients who would benefit from increasing the amount of moderate-intensity physical activity they do.

"One way to promote and sustain walking is through the provision of outdoor health walk groups, schemes which typically organise short walks of under an hour in the natural environment.

"For example the 'Walking for Health' scheme, run by the Ramblers and Macmillan Cancer Support, is England's largest network outdoor group walks, with 70,000 regular walkers, 10,000 volunteer walk leaders and approximately 3,000 short walks offered every week around the country."

Jackie Hayhoe, programme manager for Walking for Health, said:
"Walking really works. Every day we see the positive impact this simple activity has on the thousands of people who regularly take part in Walking for Health group walks. We're delighted to see further evidence to support what we see on the ground - that walking with others adds to the many health and well-being benefits regular walkers see.

"As the evidence mounts, we'd like to see more local authorities, clinicians and public health professionals supporting and recommending walking groups in their local areas."

More information: *British Journal of Sports Medicine*,
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