

# Thinking of taking a walk every day? Six reasons why it's good for you

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Credit: KoolShooters from Pexels

South Africa's new president Cyril Ramaphosa has been the talk of social media with his early morning walking routine. In addition to personal walks along a Cape Town beachfront, Ramaphosa has also [led a](#)

[walk](#) in the city from the townships of Gugulethu to Athlone to promote exercise as a key part of healthy living.

While many South Africans have been bemused by the fact that the busiest man in the country has time for a morning walk, studies show that walking is a good way to tackle burgeoning rates of obesity and other lifestyle diseases. These have reached epidemic proportions in developed countries and are dangerously on the rise in developing countries like South Africa which has the highest levels in Africa. With more than 8 million people diagnosed as obese it's joined the likes of global heavyweights such as Mexico and the US.

These diseases are linked to specific dietary and lifestyle changes which includes patterns of increased eating, drinking and smoking along with reduced [physical activity](#), and a shift to a diet high in sugar, salt and saturated fat.

There is no doubt that movement is essential for well being. The general guidelines are that 30 minutes or more of walking every day at a speed of between [five and eight kilometres per hour](#) can improve health.

And studies show that even when people don't quite manage to walk for the recommended 30 minutes a day the [benefits](#) can still accrue. This proves that some walking is better than none at all.

For those who still need convincing, here are six reasons to take up a daily outdoor walk.

## **It doesn't cost a thing**

Walking outdoors is ideal when resources are limited, as a [study](#) in low income communities in South Africa shows. The community the research focused on was a high risk area for chronic lifestyle diseases.

The study showed how physical activity that promoted participation of rural communities is feasible – and accessible. The activities in turn addressed the growing burden of chronic diseases.

Walking in groups also adds an important element of safety. And it helps with motivation, as another [meta-analysis](#) which evaluated 42 studies found: when people walk in groups outdoors, they are less likely to give up too easily.

## **It prevents (or delays) Type 2 diabetes**

The American Diabetes Association provides strong [evidence](#) of the benefits of walking for people who have pre-diabetes, Type 2 Diabetes, or even Type 1 Diabetes.

Type two diabetes is the most common and is linked to insulin resistance (or a lack of it). Type one diabetes occurs when the body does not naturally produce sufficient insulin, and generally presents in childhood. It is not necessarily related to lifestyle habits.

About 7%, or 3.85 million South Africans between the ages of 21 and 79, have diabetes. A large proportion remain undiagnosed.

## **Decreases blood pressure**

High blood pressure is a direct risk for stroke and heart-related illnesses and threats. Walking demonstrably [reduces](#) systolic and diastolic blood pressure. Systolic blood pressure is the "first number" obtained when blood pressure is measured, and represents the pressure in the arteries at the moment the heart is actively pumping blood into the system.

Diastolic, the "second number", represents pressure in the arteries during

the heart's rest period. In other words, it stands to reason that this pressure should be considerably lower than systolic and if it isn't, it represents certain risk for cardiovascular event.

The reduction can be statistically significant enough to save a life. For example, if a person's [diastolic blood pressure](#) is 90 mm Hg they would be at considerable risk of blood pressure related events. Reducing the figure by 5 mm Hg shifts them from the "mild hypertension" category of risk to "high normal".

Current [statistics](#) show that one in three South African adults have high [blood pressure](#). [Ten](#) South Africans suffer a stroke every hour.

## **It decreases body fat**

Humans were designed to move for optimal functioning, and were designed to handle walking great distances over many hours.

Walking can contribute to improved body composition, with statistically significant [reductions](#) in body fat. To put this into perspective, this doesn't include any dietary changes, and evidence shows that exercise [combined](#) with a change in diet produces greater changes to body composition than exercise alone.

## **Reduces symptoms of depression**

Rates of depression have risen [20%](#) globally in a decade. This places depression as the one of the leading causes of disability worldwide.

Walking has been recommended for managing symptoms of depression for a long time. It's been identified as an [effective strategy](#), particularly when combined with the positive effects of sunshine and fresh air, as

well as the social cohesion experienced when in a group.

## **No adverse side effects**

Probably the best news: when individuals around the world participated in various walking programmes based on the [review of these studies](#), no notable adverse side effects were reported.

Walking is safe for children, adults and older adults alike. The take home message here is that there is nothing to lose from trying it out, and plenty to gain.

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