

### Get up and go

By Ellen Ashton-Haiste

From the toddler who lets go of Mom's hands to take those first tentative steps, to the octogenarian maneuvering down the street with the help of a cane, walking is the most predominant physical activity for most people throughout their lifetimes. So, it's good news that this is also one of the best ways to stay fit and healthy. "Walking is something everybody can do. Everybody knows how to walk," says Sarah Merkel, project coordinator at London's Canadian Centre for Activity and Aging where she also teaches urban poling walking. So, she says, it's not a stretch for people to start a regular walking program, getting out and hoofing around the neighbourhood for a half hour a day.

And that, in turn, spins off into benefits for flexibility, balance, coordination and range of motion, all particularly important for older adults who want to remain independent, Merkel says. "It's going to keep you walking up and down those stairs in your home and being able to do things around your home and your garden."

Better yet, regular walking can also stave off chronic conditions, like cardiovascular disease, diabetes and osteoporosis, all exacerbated by an inactive lifestyle and being overweight.

But, for most people, the most tangible benefit is just feeling great.

"I've always believed walking makes you feel good," says Marion Ready. "I have high blood pressure and as long as I walk I can keep it under control. And, I sleep better. I have more energy."

Ready recently took her regular walking routine to a new level, participating in Merkel's course. And while the brisker pole walking helped her drop pounds, she says she lost inches with a regular program and a goal of walking 10,000 steps a day, measured with a pedometer.

“We all want to stay as young as possible,” says the 57-year-old. “I have grandchildren and I want to be able to keep up with them.”

Her enthusiasm has rubbed off on her husband, who in addition to doing the daily chores on their farm has started walking up the road to the corner and back (“1000 steps one way,” she says).

Mary Lou Douglas is also a long-time walking advocate, and cites weight loss as a benefit. Now in her 70s, Douglas has also moved to pole walking and feels it gives her a greater feeling of safety and stability.

Douglas and the Readys are examples of a movement that is growing among older adults.

“I’m definitely seeing those trends,” Merkel says. “I think the government has done a really good job (educating people) with the physical guide for older adults. What I’m seeing is people learning why it’s important to be active.”

Toronto podiatrist Dr. Hartley Miltchin says he’s also seeing the wave. “For sure, I see so many people who are coming home from work, will have dinner and then go out for a walk with their spouses, or they’ll walk the dog in the morning for an hour.

“A lot of people are also walking with the advent of better treadmills,” he adds. “People, in general, are just more health conscious. So that’s the great news.”

And walking is one of the best health and fitness activities around, he says, much better than running which is “so jarring to the body that it really creates havoc on the feet, ankles and knees.

“Walking is basically injury-free, great cardiovascular exercise. And it gets you outside a lot of the time. Even if you do it on a treadmill, it’s wonderful exercise.”

Merkel says the social aspect of walking with a group or a friend is part of the charm. In a survey done at the centre a couple of years ago, participants cited the social aspect as their number-one reason for coming to the centre. Fitness and the activities came second.

“I know for people who are aging, it’s really nice to be able to connect with others who are going through the same things as they are.” And being outside enjoying nature adds to the experience.

Ready agrees, saying she has enjoyed being able to walk outside during the past month while the winter weather held off. “It was so nice, to be seeing the Christmas lights.”

She and some of the other women who took part in Merkel’s course have formed their own weekly walking group. The social aspect is great but there’s also something to be said for solitary treks, Ready says. “I enjoy going out with the girls but I also like going by myself. It’s my meditation.”

The other good news about walking, Merkel says, is that it’s never too late to start. Muscles can always be retrained and strengthened.

“If you’re older and a little more frail, it’s still going to benefit you. We like to preach that there’s always progression. So if you start with a walker, you can progress to using a cane. And maybe you can get to the point where you’re not even using the cane anymore.”

*This article originally appeared in the January 2010 issue of Forever Young Newspaper*