

Step Back Into Spring **By Dr. Stephen O'Neil**

With the spring weather coming, many of us are anxious to get back outdoors and back in action. Many of us are also finally going to get started on a new exercise program or begin playing summer sports again. Those of us who are not exercising or not planning on beginning some sort of exercise probably should.

May I introduce you all to the most basic, most easily accessible, and fundamental form of exercise. Walking. These days, people are caught up in many different health crazes and novelty programs, when one of the easiest and most beneficial activities is overlooked. The vast array of benefits from walking can influence your life in many positive ways.

1. Walking can increase the strength of your heart and muscles
2. Walking can lower cholesterol
3. Walking increases strength, stamina, energy, flexibility and balance
4. Walking increases bone mass. Bones become stronger and decrease the risk of osteoporosis
5. Along with a healthy diet, walking 45 minutes every other day can burn 18 pounds of fat in one year
6. Walking can decrease high blood pressure and aid diabetics
7. Walking, like other exercise promotes better sleep
8. Walking as little as 20 minutes per day has been shown to stimulate human growth hormones, which has been shown to reduce fat, increase bone mass, improve skin and reverse many other symptoms of aging
9. Walking greatly boosts the immune system
10. Walking can provide a mental and emotional lift that carries over into other areas of your life.

When beginning a walking program, like any exercise program, some guidelines should be followed to maximize your experience.

1. Invest in some good walking shoes. Walking is a much different motion from running and requires a slightly firmer shoe.
2. Begin slowly and build up time and distance gradually. Many people dive right into exercise and "hit their head" so to speak. Walking can cause some pain. Although this is a good pain, it can also be a deterrent to many to continue with the exercise activity.
3. Plan for the weather. When in the hot summer months, walk in the early morning or late afternoon to avoid the added stress from heat. When windy, begin your walk in the wind and return with it at your back to avoid exhaustion or catching a chill.
4. Drink water before and after your walk to maintain proper hydration.
5. Stretch your legs and warm up before walking and stretch again to cool down when finished.

With walking as with any other form of exercise, consistency is the key. Do it at a pace that suits you and doesn't put pressure on you. Start slowly and engage in it moderately, gradually increasing time and distance. Walking with a partner can be more interesting and you can offer each other motivation when needed. Walking just three times per week can put the spring back in your step and greatly improve your quality of life now and in the future.