

## Help sheet 17:

### Increasing opportunities for walking

Walking is one of the most efficient, effective and practical forms of physical activity for cardiovascular endurance. It incorporates some level of balance training and strength training all into the one activity. In an Australian study, walking was nominated as the most preferred form of physical activity for both sedentary and active people aged over 60 (Active and Inactive Australians, 1995). Walking has the added advantage of increasing outdoor activity, thereby enhancing access to sunlight which is important for maintenance of Vitamin D status and bone health (refer to Help sheet 5.6 in the Nutrition resource manual and Help sheet 4 in this Resource Kit).

### Walking for health

The amount of walking necessary to achieve some health benefits for older people will vary, depending on a number of factors:

#### a) Baseline level of fitness

Walking may not be an appropriate activity for very frail older people if they are experiencing trouble maintaining their balance standing or difficulty standing up out of a chair. For these people, strengthening and balance exercises may be required before starting a walking program (see Help sheet 14 in this Resource Kit). For less frail older people able to walk safely, walking around the block on a regular basis may be sufficient to achieve some physical and psychological benefits over time. For these people, short walks more often are most valuable.

For healthier older people, longer distance walking will be required to achieve health benefits.

#### b) Co-morbidity

A range of health problems will limit a person's walking ability. In particular, cardiovascular problems such as heart disease, intermittent claudication (pain in the legs due to poor arterial circulation), and congestive cardiac failure may limit the distance a person is able to walk. In such cases, a medical review should be undertaken before commencing a program to increase physical activity.

**c) Other issues to consider** (see also Help sheet 16 in this Resource Kit for further issues for physical activity)

- Ensure appropriate footwear for safety and comfort (avoid slippers or high heels), such as:
  - flat/low, broad, well rounded heels
  - laces or Velcro fastenings
  - flexible soles with good tread.
- If the person is using a walking aid, ensure they have an appropriate walking aid and that they are using it properly. As a general rule:
  - the height of a walking aid should come up to the wrist crease when the person stands straight
  - if one leg is weak or painful, and a stick or four-point stick is used, it should be used in the opposite hand to the weak/painful leg

- if one leg is weak or painful, the gait aid should be taking weight when the weak/painful leg is weight-bearing
- if the rubber stoppers on the bottom of the gait aid are wearing thin, replacements can be purchased at larger pharmacies.

Advice regarding correct prescription and use of a walking aid can be obtained from a physiotherapist.

- Ensure clothing is comfortable, lightweight and loose-fitting. In cold weather, wear layers of lightweight clothing that will breathe yet trap heat and keep out the wind.
- If the person is undertaking a walk above their normal levels of activity, they should spend some time doing warm up stretches. At the end of a walk, slow the walking rate down to cool down and allow heart rate to return to normal.
- If the person is starting a new walking program, they should start slowly and at smaller distances, then slowly increase the distance over the weeks. Older people with health problems should speak to their doctor prior to starting a walking program (see Help sheet 14 in this Resource Kit).
- If the safety of the local environment is a concern (for example, uneven footpaths, hills) walking within a shopping centre may help decrease the person's concerns.
- Parking the car further from the shops and walking the extra distance is another option for people considering an increase in the amount of walking they are doing.
- If muscle pain or cramps occur, stop walking and relax and gently stretch the muscle. Proceed at a slower pace.
- If taking part in physical activity outdoors on sunny days, particularly in warmer months, exercise in the earlier or later part of the day rather than in the middle of the day when there is more ultraviolet light that will damage skin quickly. Exposure of skin of hands, face and arms without sunscreen for short periods on most days is necessary for maintaining adequate Vitamin D status, which is important for bone health (see Help Sheet 4 in this Resource Kit). If out for more extended periods of time, seek shady areas, use an umbrella or wear a broad brimmed hat and sunscreen. Sunglasses to protect your eyes from bright sunlight at any time are recommended.

### **Promoting and maintaining interest**

To promote and maintain an older person's interest in walking:

- encourage the person to walk with a friend or group where social contact will make activity more rewarding and enable participants to encourage one another.
- vary the places you walk or even go to a place of interest, such as a museum, park or historic landmark.

- use a pedometer to monitor the number of steps taken and progress. The person could keep a diary of their progress so they can look back at their improvements. Further information regarding pedometers can be obtained from the Health Foundation by contacting the Heartline on **1300 362 787** or [www.heartfoundation.com.au](http://www.heartfoundation.com.au)

Where there are concerns about the issues listed above, discuss and develop a management plan in conjunction with a physiotherapist or GP.

### For more information

#### Kinect Australia Neighbourhood Walk and Talk

This program is running in many communities in Victoria. It is a program for older people where a group of interested people meet a few times a week and walk between 30 and 60 minutes. For more information call Kinect Australia Walk and Talk on **832 000 100** or the 'Go for your life' infoline on **1300 73 98 99**.

#### Exercise guide for older persons

This guide for older people offers a comprehensive outline of self monitoring and how to start a walking program for healthier older people. It is available on the website: [http://www.cpa.sa.gov.au/benefits\\_exercise/walking.html](http://www.cpa.sa.gov.au/benefits_exercise/walking.html)

The Centre for Physical Activity in Ageing, Hampstead Rehabilitation Centre, 207–255 Hampstead Rd, Northfield, SA, 5085, Ph: (08) 8222 1891.

#### The Better Health Channel

For some tips on walking for older people visit the website:

<http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au>

### References

Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories (1995) *Active and inactive Australians: assessing and understanding levels of physical activity*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

Singh, MA (2002) 'Exercise comes of age: rationale and recommendations for a geriatric exercise prescription', *Journals of Gerontology Series A: Biological Sciences and Medical Sciences*, 57(5), M262–282.