Aging Lifestyles: Walking a big step toward better health

by Joe_Volz

Now that obesity is a national epidemic, health experts are making a renewed push to get us to walk more - at least 10,000 steps a day.

Walking is a mild and enjoyable bit of exercise. Regular walking could prolong your life, insist the experts at the International Longevity Center, a research policy organization in New York.

The center has put out an electronic brief called "Walk to a Healthy Future," listing the "top 10 healthy walking tips."

I figured I would try out the ILC's advice - "test drive" the ideas, so to speak. I have been rising early each morning these last three months to walk around my neighborhood in Frederick, Md., a few miles down the road from Camp David, where a biking and jogging sexagenarian, President George Bush, often does his strenuous exercising.

I am a decade older than the chief executive, so I have a less vigorous program. But here is how I have progressed, following the advice of an ILC geriatrician, Dr. Harrison Bloom.

He asserts, "Walking can help reduce the risk of chronic disease, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, osteoporosis, non-insulin dependent diabetes, anxiety and depression. It's also helpful to decrease insomnia."

Bloom says that 10,000 steps are about five miles, depending on one's stride. Sounds like a good goal. I measured out a 1.3-mile course in the neighborhood and after a few days did two laps, raising the walk to three laps in a month. That was about four miles on a flat surface each morning. A few weeks ago, I added a fourth lap, so I am now walking about five miles, seven days a week. I will add a hill or two in the months ahead.

I don't know if it's 10,000 steps or not, but it takes me about an hour and a half to do it. I am not out to set any speed walking records - at least not yet. Bloom says don't overdo it. First thing, before doing any walking, you should check with your physician.

"You should be able to talk and carry on a conversation while you are exercising," he says. "If you can't, you may be working too hard."

I have no trouble talking into my tape recorder. I keep notes of my progress and anything else on my mind. I also bring along a bottle of water. And I make it a point to walk early before the sun gets too overwhelming. On the East Coast, it gets pretty hot and humid in summer around 8, so I get out there at 6:30.

I try to walk in the street - we have a quiet neighborhood - because the asphalt is not as punishing on my knees as the concrete sidewalks.

If it is rainy, I go over to our local YMCA, which has a cushioned walking and running track. It's 18 laps to a mile and it can get pretty boring walking 90 laps, so I avoid that option as much as I can. I prefer the scenic outdoors. Bloom insists that I ought to be exercising my brain as I walk, so I have taken to memorizing the license plates of my neighbors' cars.

One piece of sensible advice that Bloom recommends has eluded me so far. He suggests that I find a group of fellow walkers, or create a group. I am more likely to keep walking if I have a buddy or two to walk with, he predicts.

Well, most of the pedestrians in my neighborhood are walking their pooches. And they make a lot of unannounced stops. Besides, they don't walk very fast. So, I ruled both the dogs and their minders out as walking companions.

I did find a neighbor, Mike, who swore that he was out there every morning at 7. He lied. He is rarely out there at 7 or at all. Something always gets in the way.

I have discovered if I want to keep up a steady routine, I can't rely on anyone else.

I am a solo walker. So be it. It's great exercise and, no doubt, quite healthy, also.

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