Walking can be a lifesaver, but many need to pick up pace

New studies pinpoint even more health benefits to exercise, especially brisk walking.

Regular exercise, such as brisk walking, may be one of the best prescriptions for improving your health, recent research confirms.

One study showed that taking a 15-minute moderate-paced (3 mph) walk about 30 minutes after a meal helped control blood sugar in people who are at risk for developing type 2 diabetes. Other research found that exercise may be as effective as medication in preventing early death in people who have had heart attacks or strokes.

About 25% of all breast cancer cases in women of all ages could be avoided by maintaining a healthy body weight and doing regular physical activity, research shows.

These studies add to a large volume of research on the benefits of regular physical activity. Exercise has been shown to lower the risk of early death, help control weight and reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, depression, some types of cancer and a host of other conditions.

“Walking is really powerful medicine,” says Miriam Nelson, a professor at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University in Boston and co-author of Strong Women Stay Young. “Exercise targets so many different aspects of health.”

Almost nothing is easier and cheaper than walking, but many people need to pick up the pace and put some spring into their step, she says. And they need to walk whenever they can: Walk to do errands, walk the dog, go out and enjoy a local park.

It's probably the most convenient physical activity that you can work into your life, says exercise physiologist Richard Cotton, a spokesman for the American College of Sports Medicine in Indianapolis. "It just requires shoes. You can walk wherever you are, even if it's just walking in place in your house or taking the stairs more."

Walking is the most popular form of physical activity among adults in the USA and the most frequently reported activity among adults who meet the federal physical-activity guidelines, the government says.

The physical-activity guidelines recommend getting at least 2½ hours a week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity, such as brisk walking, or one hour and 15 minutes a week of vigorous-intensity aerobic activity, such as jogging. Plus, the guidelines recommend that adults do muscle-strengthening activities, such as push-ups, sit-ups or lifting weights.

So how fast is a brisk walk?

It depends on the person. For some people, a 3 mph pace would be a brisk walk, but for others, that would be a moderate pace, says Nelson, who co-chaired the committee that created the government's physical-activity guidelines. "Brisk means that you get warm while walking, and you can sense that your heart rate is slightly elevated."

Add Cotton: "You should be able to converse but not sing. You should feel like if you moved any faster, you'd be breathless."
You can time yourself on your loop around the neighborhood, mall or walking trail and push yourself to walk it a bit faster over time, he says. "I carry my smartphone, and I use the MapMyWalk app to track the time and measure the distance."

Mark Fenton (http://www.markfenton.com), an adjunct associate professor at Tufts University and co-author of Pedometer Walking, offers these suggestions for increasing your walking speed:

• Start with good posture. Stand tall, shoulders back, no sway in your lower back, head up and eyes on the horizon. "This opens your chest for easier breathing and removes tension from the shoulders and neck. It also brings hips into a better position for a powerful stride," he says.

• Focus on quicker steps. "Don't force a longer stride. Let that come naturally. But consciously picking up the step rate will help you boost the speed and intensity of the workout."

• Keep your arms bent at a 90-degree angle at the elbow, like a runner, for a compact, quick arm swing, he says. "It helps you take quicker steps, and there's evidence that a vigorous arm swing increases your caloric expenditure."

• Push vigorously off your toes at the end of every step. "That lengthens your stride, works the calf muscles more and propels the leg forward into the next step."

When it comes to increasing the amount you walk, one way to motivate yourself is to get a pedometer or activity tracker and start tracking your steps and other movement, Fenton says. Wear the pedometer or tracker from the time you get up until you hop into bed. Do that for a few days and figure out your average daily steps. This is your baseline level of activity.

Increase your walking time gradually, adding 10% to 20% to your daily average each week, he says. So if the first week you averaged about 4,000 steps a day, the next week shoot for 4,800 steps a day. Keep boosting by 20% each week, with a goal of eventually getting to 10,000 steps a day (roughly 5 miles of walking, depending on your stride length), Fenton says.

Or, if you don't want to count steps, you can keep track of the number of minutes you exercise each day with the goal of getting at least 30 minutes of conscious physical activity every day, he says.

Fenton offers these tips for walking:

• Schedule your walk just as you would an appointment, so you don't skip it. Even if you can do only five, 10 or 20 minutes, that's better than doing nothing at all.

• Plan your walk for the time of day that you're most likely to make it a permanent habit. There is some evidence that mornings are a little better, because it can't get pushed out of the schedule as easily, but later in the day is fine, too, he says.

• Choose comfortable footwear. Shoes shouldn't scrunch your toes or let your heel slip in and out when you take a step. Replace shoes often — at least every three to five months or 300 to 500 miles, whichever comes first. Err low if you're heavy or tough on shoes.

• If you're just getting started, don't try to do too much too soon, or you may get sore and become frustrated. Start with as little as 10 minutes, but try to move continuously for that whole time. Don't worry about speed at first. Just focus on making your walk a daily habit.

• Keep a record. It can be as simple as writing the number of minutes you walk on a daily calendar, so you can appreciate your progress. "I'm old-school and keep a written exercise diary. I still think it's most effective, because I write in it at bedtime and feel great guilt if I've done nothing," Fenton says.

• Add four minutes of stretching to your daily habit. Stretch at the end of your walk or after warming up.

• Don't ignore or exercise through pain. Always see a doctor if pain is not relieved by several days of rest, ice, massage and elevation. Back off from activities such as walking hills or knee-bending exercises if they cause pain.