

## **Walk Yourself Fit**

By Lisa Schilling

Walking is the most frequently recommended activity to improve overall health, generally because it does not require special equipment, skill or location to participate. It is possible to walk anywhere, anytime and it is a natural form of aerobic exercise. Walking strengthens your muscles, bones and your cardiorespiratory system (heart and lungs). It also has the added benefits of relieving tension, controlling weight and can improve mood. It is not a tough sell; walking is great for everyone. The challenge is to determine a way to make it work in your busy lifestyle and according to your current fitness level. Committing to a walking plan is a way to jump start your fitness program.

A basic recommendation for those starting a walking program would be to start with one mile walks, 4-5 times per week. Be sure to always warm up by slow strolling or doing basic slow stretches to prevent injury. Walk times can be gradually increased by five minutes each week. After 3-4 weeks most people are able to walk two miles at a four mile per hour pace, five times a week. You can gain greater aerobic benefit from walking longer and by using your arms. By bending the arms and swinging them as you walk, you will increase the intensity of the exercise. This is also a way for people who have joint problems to get more benefit from walking. They can gain intensity without more stress on the knees.

Any exercise can be measured by using the acronym F.I.T.: Frequency of the exercise-how often you do it. Intensity of the exercise-how hard you are exerting yourself and Time-how long are you spending doing the exercise. By varying these three principles you can control the benefit you will get from the exercise. If

you are very inactive or have various physical restrictions, you may need to start at a much slower pace than that. Whatever you are able to start out doing, whether walking around the block or even just across the room, you need to make a plan and get started. You can gradually increase your efforts as you become more conditioned. Ways to determine if you are becoming more conditioned would include shortening completion times on a fixed route and decreasing your resting heart rate at the completion of your course. Either would be a sign that you are becoming more physically fit and that you are increasing your endurance. Many people need a goal to keep them motivated. By timing your walks and checking your heart rate at its completion you will track your progress. Walking with a buddy or listening to audio books can be other great ways to get motivated, stay on track and be more accountable.

Another idea to promote walking is by using a pedometer. Note your normal steps by averaging your daily steps for a week. Begin to intentionally add 500 more steps per day until you reach at least 10,000 steps per day, which is recommended for good health. Incorporating short bursts of running or sprinting followed by recovery walking can keep your heart rate elevated even when you return to the slower pace. This can allow you to get more benefit from your exercise without having to run or jog the entire time. This interval walking can also be used to increase intensity and push you out of a plateau.

Things to consider when walking are the location and terrain. Will you walk inside or outside? Will you walk on concrete, grass, gravel, pavement, or a cushioned track? The many variations will affect the outcome you receive. Likewise, things like hills and rough terrain will increase the intensity level of the workout.

Take that into consideration when you are timing your walks. This can provide a tentative guide to your progress.