Walk This Way

You don’t need to run to get healthy

February 22, 2007 By Alicia Villarosa

Skip the expensive gym membership and gear: Walking is low-impact, meaning it’s gentle on joints, and weight-bearing, so it helps maintain bone health. It can strengthen your heart, boost your mood and relieve chronic aches, pains and stress. All it takes is putting one foot in front of the other for at least 30 minutes every day.

But a leisurely stroll won’t get it. You need to stride briskly, as if you’re late for an important date. A fast walk can burn about 300 calories per hour (more if you add higher-speed intervals or walk uphill). To make sure you’re going fast and hard enough, imagine a scale of 1 to 10. At 1, you’re chilling; at 10, you’re a heartbeat from needing CPR. Warm up at level 2 or 3 for five minutes, then advance to levels 6 to 8, maintaining that intensity for 20 minutes. You should be breathing harder but able to speak in full sentences. Cool down for five minutes at level 2, then stretch a bit to prevent sore muscles. As you become more fit, you’ll have to walk faster or on steeper terrain to hit that 6 to 8 level.

A walking partner can offer support and turn exercise into fun. Grab a relative, recruit a neighbor or put the word out at church. You can also find buddies and groups in your area by searching “Heart Walk” at the American Heart Association’s website (www.americanheart.org). The National Black Women’s Health Imperative offers kits with guidelines and tips for forming a group (www.blackwomenshealth.org; 202.548.4000). If your neighborhood feels unsafe, use the local high school track or march around a mall in the early morning. When you reach the food court, just walk on by. Also add walking to your everyday activities and errands. If your destination is within ten blocks, why not step to it?

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