

Not so long ago, most people walked regularly as part of their daily lives. Journeys to the shops, to school, or to visit a friend would all be made on foot. But today, with our increasing dependence on cars, it's easy to think of walking as an optional extra. Walking might sound like a time-consuming and unnecessarily painful way of getting around when you have arthritis. But in fact, it can provide the answer to a whole range of difficulties, and many people with arthritis find that getting walking has given them a new lease of life.

One of these is Carole Hobbs, who has osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. Carole is a walk leader with the East Kent Health Walkers. Since 2000, Carole has had a new knee, hip and shoulder, and has two bolts in her neck so she can only twist from her waist. She feels that walking has helped her overcome all these challenges. 'I love walking – the fresh air and the exercise,' she says. 'I've made so many friends through it, and it's the first thing that motivates me when I get out of hospital.'

Why walk?

So what is so special about walking? Any form of exercise will have benefits, such as helping with weight loss and improving overall health. But walking does this with minimal impact on joints. 'Walking helps maintain muscle tone and joint stability, increases bone density, reduces joint stiffness, helps control weight thus reducing the strain on vulnerable joints, and promotes a healthy lifestyle,' explains physiotherapist, Chris Keevil.

Walking also helps with a mind-boggling range of other conditions, ranging from depression and insomnia to cardiovascular disease and constipation. Walking is extremely flexible. Forget expensive gym membership fees or equipment; it costs nothing, and you choose whether to go alone or in company, for a six-mile countryside ramble or just a 10-minute stroll to the newsagent. If you don't fancy going out, simply pace about while you're on the telephone, or walk on a treadmill in front of the telly. You can tailor each walk accordingly, by choosing the distance, time, pace or terrain to fit how you are feeling on good and bad days.

For many people, walking is even more beneficial emotionally than physically. 'Walking releases endorphins, the body's feel-good hormones. It helps lighten the mood and can be a good distraction from pain,' explains Jo Cumming, Arthritis



STEPPING OUT

When you have arthritis, walking can provide a real boost – not just to ease stiff joints, but for your overall health – as Eleanor Stanley finds out

Care's helpline manager. 'Getting out and about around your neighbourhood is not only good for your health; it also provides a good opportunity to bump into neighbours and have a chat, which can lift the spirits.' Many people rediscover a love of nature when they start walking. A glimpse of a kingfisher, a wild orchid or a roe deer may inspire you to find out more about local flora and fauna.

Leonard Madden, 63, has rheumatoid arthritis, and has had both his hips replaced in the past three years. Leonard walks his youngest granddaughter half a mile to and from school each day, but he wasn't always so mobile: 'Initially, changing from being very active to what I thought was crippled and disabled was quite a shock. After the arthritis got really bad, I sat in front of the television for about 18 months and did nothing. I got fat and was always tired and very grumpy. I used to



snap at everyone. I had no motivation at all – always making excuses for not doing things. My family told me I wasn't very pleasant. But now that I walk every day, I don't often see my GP other than to renew prescriptions, and I'm much less grumpy and more sociable.'

Getting started

If you decide you'd like to give walking a go, the first step is to talk to your GP and other healthcare professionals, such as a physiotherapist or podiatrist. They can tell you if there are any particular considerations relating to your specific condition – for example, they may suggest that you avoid steep inclines or use a walking stick. Arthritis Care's booklet, *Exercise and Arthritis*, also has plenty of ideas on how to get started.

Then think about the kind of walking you want to do, remembering that doing

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four 15-minute walks in a day is just as good for you as doing one longer walk. If you want to incorporate walking into your daily life, think about which daily chores you can carry out on foot. For example, rather than doing one weekly shop in the car, try buying one or two food items every day, and walking to the supermarket instead.

The key is to adapt the activity to your needs. Joan Wilcox, 72, has osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis. On her good

From the beach to the streets – there are many places you can take a walk

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days she walks as much as she can, but finds it difficult to carry things as it hurts her shoulder and elbow, so she runs other kinds of errands on foot, such as going to the doctor. 'You will have better days than others, and it helps to remember that. There are little things you can do, like soaking in hot water, or rubbing in creams from the doctor, which can help you get going,' says Joan. 'Going walking does take a lot of planning, but it's definitely worth it – you feel better when you're out and about seeing people, and you get a sense of satisfaction from doing what you set out to achieve.'

If you prefer the idea of more structured walks, make a list of some places you'd like to visit, and buy a book of local walks and an Ordnance Survey map for the area. This will show useful details such as the gradient, so you can make sure you don't find yourself hill walking, when you'd envisaged a gentle woodland stroll. If you want to hunt out local walking groups, try your local tourist information centre, library or GP surgery, the Ramblers Association (www.ramblers.org.uk or call 020 7339 8500) or Disabled Ramblers (www.disabledramblers.co.uk or write to Orchard Cottage, Uplands, Ashted, Surrey KT21 2TN).

When it comes to clothing, you will need layers that you can easily put on or take off, and a light waterproof. Shoes should have thick soles, wide heels and

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a snug fit, and you may find thick socks helpful too. If you have to walk on pavements, look for shoes with good shock-absorbing properties, such as trainers. If you are unsure, or find walking painful, your GP may refer you to a podiatrist. Kay Blowes of the Society for Chiropodists and Podiatrists explains: 'A podiatrist can give you a complete assessment and podiatric treatment, as well as foot health information and pressure-relieving devices, which may ease pain and increase mobility.' The podiatrist may provide specialist devices for your existing shoes, or may even make up specialist therapeutic shoes for you.

Setting off

On the day, look at the weather forecast and take a moment to think about how you are feeling, and what you can realistically manage in terms of distance and terrain. Make sure you will have time to finish the walk in daylight, or choose a well-lit area where you will feel safe. Tell someone where you are planning to go.

If you feel very stiff it might help to have a warm bath before you leave home

What you pack to take with you will depend on how far afield you are going. You may need a mobile phone and money, train or bus times, a guidebook and/or map and compass, a bottle of water and some snacks such as fruit or sandwiches, any medication, and equipment such as walking poles, along with your

Why not...

- ... make a day of it and take a picnic
- ... discover the local beauty spots
- ... join a local walking group
- ... start playing golf, which involves a lot of walking
- ... get a mobile handset and pace around during phone calls
- ... buy a guidebook and brush up your knowledge of local birds or flowers
- ... take a train to another city and explore

Ask the expert

Physiotherapist, **Chris Keevil**, answers some common questions about walking.

How do I know when to stop? You should feel a bit of a glow, but if you get short of breath or feel pain, rather than a general ache, stop.

Do I really need to warm up and cool down? Yes. Start walking gently to warm up, and after five minutes have a gentle stretch. Ask your physiotherapist or someone from your local gym for a sheet of exercises. When you get home, stretch again while you make a cup of tea.

What pace should I aim for? Not a slow meander, but not so fast you couldn't hold a conversation at the same time – a reasonable pace that feels comfortable.

What sort of terrain should I look for? The softer, the better. Very hard surfaces such as tarmac, or loose surfaces such as scree are much harder to walk on than soft grass or forest floors. If you have to walk on pavements, use shoes with good shock-absorbing properties.

How much do I need to walk to make a difference? Initially, most people can manage 20 minutes, three times a week, progressing to the ideal, which is 30 minutes every day.

When is the best time to walk? After lunch is a good time, as by then your body will have warmed up and will be more flexible.

When should I avoid walking? Avoid walking when it's very cold as your joints will be stiffer, or when it's very hot as swelling around joints may increase. You should also consider resting if you have had a flare up, are in a great deal of pain, or if you've been told not to by your GP – especially if you've just had surgery.

waterproof and spare clothing. Put all this in a comfortable bag, such as a small rucksack that spreads the load evenly across your back.

If you feel very stiff, it might help to have a warm bath before you leave home. Chris Keevil suggests starting off gently and checking your posture, and stopping after a few minutes to do some stretches. 'Make sure your posture is good – long and strong – with your arms swinging from your sides, and avoiding limping or hunching over,' he says. 'Throughout the walk, listen to your body. With practice, you'll get better at knowing when it's time to rest or go home. Take regular rests, and stretch again when you get home.' Try to remember how long you walked for or what distance you covered. Watching your capacity increase over time will be very satisfying.

'You can just tell if you've pushed yourself too hard,' says Christine Gilligan, 50, who has had rheumatoid arthritis for 10 years. 'I get a strong feeling of complete exhaustion that I didn't have before – and I know that if I carry on then my joints will just go, and the next day I'll be in pain.'

Staying motivated

Staying motivated can be a real challenge especially when faced with daily pain. However, walking can decrease your pain levels both immediately and in the long run. This can happen during a walk as your body releases endorphins, your joints warm up and other factors such as the distraction of being out and about.

According to Chris Keevil, you should also see cumulative pain relief over time as your muscle tone improves. 'As the muscles get stronger they'll stabilise the joint better, which means less pressure on the joint surfaces. There's less strain because the muscles are doing more of the work.'

If that isn't enough reason to keep going, why not follow Christine Gilligan's lead and find a companion to join you – either of the two-legged or four-legged variety?

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'As soon as my medication kicked in and things got more manageable, I got a dog and started walking,' she says. Christine now walks her dog twice a day, and has set up a group of dog owners who go for a longer walk every month. 'I wouldn't walk nearly so much without the dog,' she admits.

There is no denying that keeping motivated can be hard. 'Pain can make you afraid. It can stop you doing things. But walking can help you control the pain better – not just because of the reduced stiffness, but also because you get out and see people and have a sense of achievement. It's such a simple thing – but it can turn around your life,' says Jo Cumming. 