

Better Health and Wellness, One Step at a Time

Staying physically active is one of the most effective ways to improve health and wellness. Physical activity helps reduce high blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol levels. It also helps maintain or lose weight, and improve overall heart and lung function. Physical activity plays an important role in preventing and managing chronic diseases such as heart disease and Type 2 diabetes.

Cathy Osborne, Program Leader of Cardiovascular Health at Royal Inland Hospital in the Interior Health Authority, wanted to find alternate strategies to help people who are at risk or have cardiovascular disease be more physically active by incorporating small, steady lifestyle changes into daily life.

“I was intrigued by the use of step counters, or pedometers, to increase the physical activity levels of people who have a chronic disease or within the population as a whole,” Osborne says. “I learned of Japan’s 10,000 Steps Program which promotes daily walking exercise through the use of pedometers.”

Active people take approximately 10,000 steps per day, whereas inactive people take 2,000 to 4,000 steps. People use the pedometer to monitor their progress towards walking more each day. Each person can set measurable and appropriate goals for his or her own health and fitness. While 10,000 steps a day (or about 5 miles a day) is the desired goal, this may not be appropriate for people with chronic diseases, older adults and children. Instead, a more suitable goal is to reach the recommended 30 minutes of moderate activity almost daily.

“I introduce the option of using a pedometer as a self-management tool to people receiving cardiovascular risk reduction and congestive heart failure education, as well as diabetes and lung health education,” she notes.

Patients in her program purchase a pedometer or may get one on loan. “The objective is to increase activity relative to one’s baseline,” she explains. Individuals wear the pedometer for seven days and then determine the average number steps taken each day.

They set their goal based on the seven-day average, their physical condition and an 80 per cent confidence level that they can achieve their goal. Each week an additional 50 to 250 steps per day are taken in order to reach their goal. They receive assistance in finding ways to include walking into their daily lives such as parking the car farther way from their destination, or even walking around the house during television commercials.

Efforts are then focused on encouraging people to walk briskly for 30 minutes a day, five or more days a week. This can also be achieved by taking a few short walks each day. People can choose to walk alone, with friends or family, join a walking group, or if required, participate in a supervised exercise program.

“We encourage setting realistic goals so success can be celebrated.” Success could be reaching 10,000 steps for some, or a 30 per cent increase in activity for others. Some

individuals have increased their level of physical activity anywhere from 500 to 8,000 steps each day.

“Each patient keeps a log and tracks his or her progress,” notes Osborne. “People are thrilled that they are finally getting credit for all of the other physical activity they do in a day - not just when they go for a walk.”

While using a pedometer to help increase activity may not be everyone’s preference, it has been well received by those choosing this approach. The pedometer is a self-management tool that helps to remind and motivate people to be more active.

For example, Bruce suffered a heart attack in May 2003. When Cathy Osborne told him about pedometers, he saw a win/win situation. “If the pedometer did help me increase my activity levels, I could also help other people become more physically active by recommending they use this tool and approach as well.”

Bruce has become more active. He started taking an average of 4,000 steps each day, and now he takes an average of 10,000 to 12,500 steps daily. Using the pedometer helps him stay focused and acts as a motivator. “If I don’t take enough steps one day, I make up for it the next day. I also plan my week so that if I know I can’t walk much on a particular day, I’ll schedule more walking another day,” says Bruce.

“I now look forward to my walks and making physical activity part of my day.” Bruce walks on his lunch hour, uses the treadmill at his local Y, and parks his car three blocks from his office and walks the remaining distance. “I now have more energy since I started walking more.”

His experience has prompted others to also start using a pedometer. “It was a nice Valentine’s Day gift for some people,” he shares.

Signe attended the Cardiovascular Health Program because she wanted to reduce and control her high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels. “I heard about the pedometer program and thought it was something I’d like to try. I enjoy walking and it’s not a difficult program.”

As a result, Signe has increased her physical activity from 9,000 to 14,000 steps per day. Her blood pressure and cholesterol levels have improved, and she has lost ten pounds. “I tried all sorts of diets and none of them worked. This did. I feel so much better.”

People she speaks to are also enthusiastic about using a pedometer. “They’re selling like hot cakes. I highly recommend them to everyone. It’s a great way to improve your health,” says Signe.

Using the pedometer to increase physical activity and fitness has become a family matter for Dave. After his heart attack in July 2003, he decided to start wearing a pedometer just to see what would happen. He is glad he made this decision.

“I was never much of a walker, but just wearing the pedometer makes me walk more. My wife also started wearing one and as a result we not only walk more, we just do more,” says Dave.

Wearing the pedometer not only acts as a reminder, it is also a motivator. For instance, both Dave and his wife Adeline park their car on the far side of parking lots and now walk the remaining distance.

“I think that everyone who has had a heart attack should use a pedometer,” he comments.

“The great thing about a pedometer is that it can be easily incorporated into the prevention and management of all chronic disease,” emphasizes Osborne.

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