

Healthy Aging Health Center

Walking Helps Seniors Take Aging in Stride

Study Shows Older Americans Can Increase Physical Function, Reduce Risk of Disability by Walking

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July 18, 2008 -- A news study by researchers at the University of Georgia shows that older folks who kept up with a [walking](#) program for four months had "significant" health improvements over a group that didn't walk.

"In the past decade, researchers have focused on the benefits of [strength training](#) in maintaining independence, but until now we didn't have good evidence using an objective performance measure that a walking program would improve physical functioning," researcher M. Elaine Cress, PhD says in a news release.

"Our study found that walking offers tremendous health benefits that can help older adults stay independent," says Cress, a professor of kinesiology and a researcher in the University of Georgia Institute of Gerontology.

The Participants

- ❖ 26 adults (22 women and four men), 60 or older were enrolled.
- ❖ 24 of the participants finished the study.
- ❖ 38% of the participants had an annual income below \$9,570, which is considered poverty level.

The Study

The participants were randomly split into two groups, the walkers and a control group, which attended [nutrition](#) education classes.

The walkers met three times a week for four months.

At first, they walked for 10 minutes straight. It was increased to 40 minutes, with 10 minutes of warm-up and cool-down [stretching](#).

Both groups were given a battery of tests to assess aerobic capacity and physical function, which included how well the participants performed simple daily living tasks such as putting on a jacket or carrying a bag of groceries.

Both groups had baseline testing at the beginning and end of the study.

After just four months, the walking group fared much better in all levels of fitness.

Results

- ❖ Physical function scores increased by 25% for the walking group, but decreased by 8.3% in the other group. The walking group's disability risk decreased by 41%.
- ❖ Peak aerobic capacity increased 19% for the walkers.
- ❖ Peak aerobic capacity declined 9% for the control group.

"Aerobic capacity is really the engine that we draw upon for doing the things we want to do, whether it's cleaning up around the house or [running](#) a marathon," Cress says. "By increasing their aerobic capacity, the walking group was better able to perform their daily tasks and had more energy left over for recreational activities, like going out dancing."

Researcher Trudy Moore-Harrison, PhD says not only were the results telling, but the participants "really enjoyed the program" and "got a chance to know their neighbors."

"We know that walking is good for you, but too many people still aren't doing it," Moore-Harrison says in a news release. "This study shows that just walking on a regular basis can make a huge impact on quality of life."

The researchers write that most exercise intervention studies involve people who are affluent. They stress the importance of looking at lower economic segments of society.

They urge further research into whether low-cost walking programs can make a difference in helping people with lower incomes enjoy healthier, independent older years.

The results are published in the *Journal of Geriatric Physical Therapy*.

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SOURCES:

Moore-Harrison, T. *Journal of Geriatric Physical Therapy*; vol 31.

University of Georgia news release.

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