

Walking is Good for You, and Everyone Knows It

By: Laura Mehegan, Senior Research Advisor, AARP Research

In case anyone needs a good reason to get out and walk, research has demonstrated many positive benefits related to walking. In a recent study in the United Kingdom of over 78,000 participants over a 7-year period, those who walked close to 10,000 steps per day reduced their dementia risk by 50 percent.¹ Other studies have shown that walking reduced knee pain in adults with arthritis,² breast cancer risk in women,³ and the risk of hip fractures in postmenopausal women.⁴

A 2022 AARP survey of adults aged 50 and older found that most agree that walking is beneficial.⁵ Recognized benefits include improving physical health (91%), fitness (83%), mental health (75%), and brain health (59%). While the benefits of walking are understood, it is noteworthy that walking is also a popular activity with nearly nine in 10 (87%) adults engaging in at least one walking-related activity in a typical week (i.e., leisurely strolling, to get where you need to go, for exercise, at work, walking a pet, recreation, hiking).

On the days when adults aged 50 and older walk for at least 10-minutes at a time, more than four in 10 (47%) do so for 30-minutes or more at a time. Walking can also be a social activity with over half (56%) of adults saying they walk with someone else at least some of the time.

Most commonly, two-thirds (68%) of adults walk in their own neighborhoods rather than in a park (27%) or another outdoor space (23%). However popular walking is, there were barriers noted that prevented adults from walking. For some, safety is an issue with 15 percent noting they do not have access to a safe place to walk, they have no sidewalks, or lighting is inadequate. The most common barrier to walking, however, is the weather with more than one-third (37%) indicating this could be a barrier. Just over one-quarter (27%) said they have no barriers to walking.

¹ JAMA Neurol. doi:10.1001/jamaneurol.2022.2672 Published online September 6, 2022. Corrected on September 9, 2022.

² Lo GH, Vinod S, Richard MJ, et al. [Association between walking for exercise and symptomatic and structural progression in individuals with knee osteoarthritis: data from the Osteoarthritis Initiative cohort](#). Arthritis Rheumatology. 2022 Jun 8. doi: 10.1002/art.42241. Online ahead of print.

³ Hildebrand, J.S., Gapstur, S.M., Campbell, P.T., Gaudet, M.M, and Patel, A.V. (2013). Recreational physical activity and leisure-time sitting in relation to postmenopausal breast cancer risk. *Cancer, Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention*, 22(10), 1906-1912. DOI: 10.1158/1055-9965.EPI-13-0407

⁴ Feskanich, D., Willett, W. and Colditz, D. (2002). Walking and leisure-time activity and risk of hip fracture in postmenopausal women. *JAMA*, 288(19), 2300-2306. DOI:10.1001/jama.288.18.2300

⁵ Mehegan, Laura. *Walking: Attitudes and Habits of Adults Aged 50 and Older*. Washington, DC: AARP Research, October 2022. <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00574.001>

Previous AARP research confirms the popularity of walking. For this research, walking has emerged as a top form of exercise and recreation. Walking, whether it is for exercise, leisure, recreation, or as a coping mechanism, is popular among different age groups.

In a 2016 survey on physical activity,⁶ adults aged 40 and older were asked the types of physical activities they do during a typical week. Activities related to walking emerged as the top three physical activities with more than half (56%) saying they walk for exercise followed by more than four in 10 (46%) who walk for leisure or walk around at their job (41%).

A 2018 survey showed that brisk walking was the most popular sport or activity engaged in by adults aged 18 and older and it was especially popular among adults over 50 years of age where nearly six in 10 (57%) said they engage in brisk walking.⁷ Another 2018 survey showed that two-thirds (68%) of adults aged 18 and older engage in walking for exercise at least weekly and one-quarter said they walk even more often when they feel stress or anxiety.⁸

Finally, a survey conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic suggested that walking was a way to cope with the pandemic. One-quarter (24%) of adults aged 18 and older said they engage in vigorous walking or other forms of exercise more often currently than they did prior to the pandemic.⁹

⁶ Rainville, Chuck. 2016 Survey on Physical Activity. Washington, DC: AARP Research, July 2016. <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00059.001>

⁷ Anderson, G. Oscar and Laura Mehegan. Sweating Together: Exercise and Social Preferences among Adults 18+. Washington, DC: AARP Research, May 2018. <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00229.001>

⁸ Mehegan, Laura, and Chuck Rainville. 2018 AARP Brain Health and Mental Well-Being Survey. Washington, DC: AARP Research, October 2018. <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00247.001>

⁹ Keenan, Teresa A. Healthy Habits During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Washington, DC: AARP Research, March 2021. <https://doi.org/10.26419/res.00444.001>