Participating in Walking Groups Is Associated with Wide-Ranging Health Benefits


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Benefits include improvements in blood pressure, lung function, body-mass index, and risk for depression. Paul S. Mueller, MD, MPH, FACP

Regular brisk walking (i.e., walking at a pace of 3–5 miles per hour) is a convenient form of exercise. Evidence suggests that joining a walking group not only is a cost-effective way to increase physical activity but that it also improves adherence to walking. To assess the health benefits of outdoor group walking, researchers conducted a meta-analysis of 42 studies from 14 countries involving 1843 participants (mean age, 54; 74% women) and 74,000 hours of participant walking time. Time spent walking ranged from 20 to 460 minutes weekly, and studies ranged in duration from 3 weeks to 1 year. Mean adherence was 75%. During the intervention, participants in walking groups showed significant improvements in systolic blood pressure, diastolic blood pressure, resting heart rate, percent body fat, body-mass index, total cholesterol, depression scores, maximum volume of oxygen consumption (VO2max), 6-minute walk time, and quality of life for physical functioning. No adverse effects were reported.

Comment:

This meta-analysis indicates that participating in outdoor walking groups has many physiological and psychological health benefits. A vexing challenge for patients is how to initiate and sustain an exercise program. Joining a walking group is easy, convenient, and safe, and it's associated with high participant adherence (presumably because of the social and supportive aspects of group walking).