Who could have thought that walking would be part of your organization’s strategic plan? The fact is it may be the answer to our nation’s epidemic of obesity and related conditions — as well as the single most effective, cost-efficient intervention you can offer your employees, members, clients, or patients. The growing body of research documented here reveals significant benefits for individuals and employers, health plans, public health agencies, nonprofit institutions, and other organizations that support ongoing walking programs.

Regular fitness walking requires only a modest investment, yet it can lead to considerable bottom-line savings from reduced health insurance costs and increased productivity.

Staying active is great for physical and mental health. It’s a critical component, along with a healthy diet, of any program for long-lasting weight management. Fitness walking also is easy for most individuals to take up and continue; it’s more accessible in today’s busy lives than swimming, bicycling, or many other physical activities.

Walking programs can:

- Aid in long-lasting weight management
- Be effective with only a modest investment
- Enhance energy and reduce stress
- Increase employee productivity
- Lower disease risk
- Promote physical and mental health
- Support better sleep
- Target all groups.
The High Costs of Inactivity

Inactivity costs $670-$1125/person annually. If the more than 88 million inactive Americans over age 15 were to increase regular moderate physical activity, annual healthcare costs might be reduced by as much as $76.6 billion.

Inactivity is closely linked to obesity — in fact, a sustained reduction of just 10% in body weight can lead to substantial health and economic benefits. Conversely, consider these specific costs associated with remaining inactive and obese:

- Obesity costs employers more than $12 billion each year in higher healthcare utilization/benefit claims, lower productivity, and increased absenteeism.
- About 9.1% of the nation’s total annual medical expenditures are attributable to overweight and obesity.
- Annual healthcare costs are higher among obese individuals than others, including:
  - 36% higher inpatient and outpatient costs
  - 45% more inpatient days
  - 77% higher medication costs
  - 48% more expenditures over $5000.

Obesity’s Rise and Its Impact on Health

The number of overweight Americans is soaring. In fact, the percent of obese US adults doubled in 1980 to 2000 — from 15% to 31%. Now, over 72 million, or 34% of adults, are obese, with nearly 2 in 3 adults (64%) being either overweight or obese. The increase is linked to a wide range of costly health problems due to a far higher risk of these conditions:

- Breast, endometrium, prostate, and colon cancers
- Depression
- Diabetes
- Heart disease
- High blood pressure
- Musculoskeletal ailments
- Poor female reproductive health
- Sleep apnea
- Stroke.

In fact, obese individuals have been shown to suffer 30%-50% more chronic medical problems than those who smoke or drink heavily. In addition, the effect of being obese on the number of chronic conditions is similar to aging 20 years.

Yet people still aren’t moving. In 2005, 40% of US adults did not participate in any physical activity during their leisure time, and only 15% met the recommended 30 minutes a day of brisk walking 5 times a week. Sedentary lifestyles are on the rise. The number of adults who spent most of their day sitting jumped from 36.8% in 2000 to almost 40% in 2005, and those who were never active increased from 9.4% to 10.3% in the same period.

Obesity costs US employers over $12 billion each year.
5 Reasons to Promote Walking

Walking offers distinct advantages for those who do it and the organizations that promote it — walking:

1. Has a clear, positive impact on health
Physicians often prescribe walking as an effective, doable way to help prevent or delay the progression of several chronic diseases including high blood pressure, heart disease, osteoporosis, diabetes, and arthritis. (See Health Benefits of Walking on page 4 for details.)

2. Is an inexpensive program to implement
No dedicated facilities are needed, and the cost is next to nothing to post walking trail maps around or through a facility or neighborhood or highlight neighborhood routes on websites like MapWalk™ (www.MapWalk.com).
A walking competition between groups nearly promotes itself.

3. Encourages high participation among all ages
• Walking is the only exercise where participation rates don’t decrease as individuals reach middle age and older. One national survey found that compared with any other group, men 65 and older had the highest percent of regular walkers — 39.4%.14
• It’s the most popular physical activity in America. More than 56 million people walk for fitness at least 100 days a year.15
• Walking is inexpensive and easy. All a person needs is a pair of comfortable, supportive shoes.16
• It comes naturally and can be done in connection with other daily activities — for example: walking to work, circling the mall or grocery aisles, walking the dog, or pacing while on the phone.
• Walking is a low impact, safe form of exercise — even for those who are obese or have arthritis.

4. Becomes a stepping-stone to other forms of exercise
It carries particular appeal for people who are new to or self-conscious about exercise. Walking can also differ in intensity by varying workouts with stairs, hills, or Nordic walking.

5. Burns about the same number of calories/mile as running
Walking 1 mile briskly in 12 minutes burns about as many calories as jogging the same distance in 8.5 minutes.17 A study among healthy women at the Washington University School of Medicine shows that when going at the same pace, walking very briskly will burn at least as many calories as jogging.18

Walking is the most popular physical activity in America.
Health Benefits of Walking
Examples of health-related findings specifically associated with walking follow.

**Decreases Heart Disease Risk**
Compared with women who engaged in no physical activity, women who walked as little as 1 hour a week — even at a gentle pace — had only about half the risk of heart disease, according to a study of 39,372 health professionals 45 and older. Women doing more vigorous exercise had an even lower risk.19

**Helps Prevent Weight Gain**
A study of inactive, overweight men and women ages 40-65 showed 30 minutes a day of walking helped them lose weight, decrease their waist size, and increase their lean body mass — even with no special dietary changes.19

**Lowers Overall Mortality**
Men ages 61-81 who walked more than 1 mile a day had 1/3 fewer deaths in a 12-year follow-up period compared with men who didn’t. The beneficial effects were evident even after taking into account other activities and risk factors.21 A study of male Harvard graduates revealed those who burned 2000 or more calories a week by walking lived 1-2 years longer than men who burned under 500 calories a week through exercise.22

**Maintains a Healthy BMI**
A University of Tennessee study found women who accumulated 10,000 steps or more each day had lower body fat percentages.23

**Protects Against Heart Attack and Stroke**
An 8-year study of 72,000 female nurses ages 40-65 found women who walked 3 or more hours a week had a 40% lower risk of heart attack and stroke than women who didn’t walk. Brisker walking produced greater benefits.24

**Reduces Risk of Diabetes**
A study of 2900 adults with diabetes indicated those who walked at least 2 hours a week had a 39% lower risk of death from any cause than adults who didn’t walk at all. People who walked more — at least 3 hours a week — had a 54% lower risk of death from any cause.25 Another study found walking 30 minutes a day nearly twice as effective as the prescription drug metformin in preventing diabetes.26

Walking reduces the risk of heart attack, stroke, diabetes, and heart disease.
Other Important Advantages

Further research shows additional advantages of physical activity. Although these other studies looked at a variety of exercise forms, their findings can be applied to walking.

Supports Productivity

Employee productivity increases with physical activity. Findings include:
- Better concentration
- Enhanced memory and learning
- Improved ability to make complex decisions
- Increased physical stamina

Prevents Disease

Regular exercise aids in managing chronic illnesses and related risk factors:
- Controls weight, cholesterol, and blood pressure; reduces the need for blood pressure, diabetes, and cholesterol medications
- Contributes to a healthy pregnancy and delivery
- Improves immune system function
- Lengthens lifespan
- Lowers the risk of obesity-related illnesses — including sleep apnea and osteoarthritis
- Minimizes the effects of diabetes, arthritis, and osteoporosis
- Prevents constipation
- Reduces the risk of heart disease, stroke, breast cancer, colon cancer, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, impotence, blood clots, and gallstones
- Relieves back pain

More

Promotes an overall sense of wellness by helping people to:
- Control appetite and increase the body’s metabolism
- Improve mood and well-being
- Maintain healthy muscles, bones, and joints
- Reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety
- Relax, feel more energetic, and control stress
- Sleep better

Conclusions

- Physical inactivity contributes to obesity, negatively affecting employee health and resulting in soaring healthcare costs and decreased productivity.
- Employer-sponsored walking programs will result in reduced health risks, improved productivity, and better quality of life for employees.
- Walking programs may be the jumpstart that employees need; it’s simple, straightforward, and less demanding on the body than many other activities.

Where to Go From Here?

Acknowledging these findings, Health Enhancement Systems has developed Walktober, a program to implement during October, National Walking Month — the ideal time for a walking campaign. The temperatures are moderate and colors are spectacular, vacations are over and the holidays haven’t arrived. Making the most of this great season, Walktober is a month-long walking campaign designed to:
- Guide participants through the benefits of walking
- Help them incorporate walking into their daily routine
- Dramatically boost the amount participants walk
- Inspire everyone to make walking a priority — in October and beyond.

There is every reason for all organizations to promote walking.
RESOURCES

- American Hiking Society (www.americanhiking.org)
- American Journal of Epidemiology (aje.oxfordjournals.org)
- American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine (ajl.sagepub.com)
- American Journal of Public Health (www.ajph.org)
- Archives of Internal Medicine (archinte.ama-assn.org)
- British Medical Journal (www.bmj.com)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov)
- Health Affairs (www.healthaffairs.org)
- Hyper tension (hyper.ahajournals.org)
- Journal of the American Medical Association (jama.ama-assn.org)
- Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic, and Neonatal Nursing (jognn.awhonn.org)
- The Journals of Gerontology (www.gerontologyjournals.org)
- Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise (www.ms-se.com)
- National Center for Health Statistics (www.cdc.gov/nchs)
- National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (www.nhlbi.nih.gov)
- The New England Journal of Medicine (content.nejm.org)
- The Physician and Sportsmedicine (www.physportsmed.com)
- The President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports (www.fitness.gov)
- Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association (www.sgma.com)
- US Department of Health and Human Services (www.hhs.gov)

End Notes
