

Walk this way: improving activity levels

Emeritus Professor **Alan Glasper**, from the University of Southampton, discusses ways of increasing daily exercise, especially walking, as a way of tackling obesity and its effects on health



Anyone who has visited their GP recently cannot have failed to notice the prominently displayed posters extolling the mantra that walking can be seriously good for your health.

The health benefits of walking have been subject to stringent research, with Marigliano et al (2016), for example, showing that moderately intensive walking can improve cardiovascular risk factors. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that all adults undertake 150 minutes of moderate exercise a week and, for additional health benefits, adults should increase their moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity to 300 minutes each week (WHO, 2017).

In a systematic review of the literature, Hupin et al (2015) have shown that even moderate activities such as regular walking can reduce mortality by 22% in older adults. Not only does regular exercise reduce the risk of premature death, but this health benefit exists even if people do less than the recommended 150 minutes. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recognised that exercise is beneficial for managing the weight and improving the lifestyle of overweight and obese adults (NICE, 2014a).

NICE acknowledges that walking and other forms of physical exercise are best undertaken in natural environments. It has called on the designers and managers of public open spaces, paths and rights of way

(including coastal, forest and riverside paths and canal towpaths), as well as planning and transport agencies, to ensure that such areas can be reached easily. Open spaces should be accessible on foot, by bicycle and by public transport. Such areas should be maintained to a high standard and be safe, attractive and welcoming to everyone (NICE, 2008).

Background

The direct cost of physical inactivity to the NHS across the UK has been estimated at £1.06 billion (Royal College of Physicians (RCP) et al, 2016). This is based on the cost of treating medical conditions such as heart disease and diabetes, which are inextricably linked to inactivity. It is estimated that increased walking and cycling in urban England and Wales could save the NHS £17 billion over the next 20 years (RCP et al, 2016).

Nurses and other health professionals are not immune to the obesity pandemic that has plagued the western world. In 2009 a cross-government strategy to address obesity in England estimated that of the 1.2 million staff in the NHS, around 300 000 would be classified as obese and a further 400 000 as overweight (Public Health England, 2009).

Research on obesity conducted among large cohorts of nurses in Australia, New Zealand and the UK showed that 61.87% fell outside the healthy weight range. Being overweight or obese was linked with increasing age among this population (Bogossian et al, 2012). This research showed that nurses were more likely to be overweight than the general population of the country in which they lived. The researchers suggest that being overweight could adversely impact on nurses' ability to optimally contribute to the functioning of the nursing team.

The high levels of obesity within the NHS workforce was recognised by the RCP in 2015 when it published guidance on weight

management for health service employees (RCP, 2015).

Such high levels of obesity among healthcare staff has not escaped the attention of the media, with one article suggesting that it might seem hypocritical for health workers to give health advice to patients when they are overweight themselves (Hammond, 2014).

Alterman et al (2013) suggested that work-related factors may contribute to the high prevalence of obesity in the US health service. They believe that the way to tackle obesity among health workers is for employers to consider workplace interventions that target organisation-level factors, such as shift scheduling and the prevention of workplace bullying, along with individual-level factors, such as diet and exercise. However, the advice on weight management through exercise sometimes fails to take into account the difficulty of exercising when working the 12-hour shifts that are now so ubiquitous.

Weight management for health service employees

The RCP provides guidance on weight management for health service employees (RCP, 2015). It recommends that employers should implement NICE guidelines on obesity (NICE, 2006; NICE, 2014b) by:

- Ensuring healthy food is available in the workplace at affordable or subsidised prices
- Encouraging nutritional labelling to allow employees to make informed food choices
- Setting strict nutritional criteria as part of procurement contracts for food outlets and vending machines (RCP, 2015).

Employers should encourage physical activity by:

- Advising staff to walk and use stairs rather than lifts
- Recommending the use of active travel methods to and from work, such as walking and cycling, and providing changing facilities and cycle-storage areas

- Working with local authorities to enhance access to health services by public transport
- Considering the use of staff incentives such as discounted membership of fitness clubs (RCP, 2015).

Employers should encourage healthy behaviour change by:

- Developing a strategy for staff health and wellbeing
- Encouraging staff to take regular breaks to move around as well as sufficient time to eat well
- Using innovative ways to encourage lifestyle change among staff, such as intranet messages on health, and signposting local activity/weight management opportunities
- Communicating the health benefits of weight loss, and publicising in-house or community-based weight-loss services (RCP, 2015).

Health benefits of walking

The RCP advises nurses and others to walk more, but how much is 'more' (RCP, 2015)?

Healthy adults should aspire to achieve a target of 10 000 steps a day (NHS Choices, 2014). An average person has a stride length of approximately 2.1 to 2.5 feet, which equates to 2000 steps to the mile, with 10 000 steps equalling 5 miles. Walking is often overlooked as a form of exercise but is recommended, especially because it can be undertaken almost anywhere, at any time and in any weather.

Pedometers can be used to ascertain how many steps have been taken each day (NHS Choices, 2014). Increasingly, people are also using fitness tracker apps on their mobile phones to monitor their activity. Walking 10 000 steps, which equates to about 2 hours of walking, will result in the burning of approximately 400 calories or up to 2800 calories per week. This represents a weight loss of about a pound in weight over the week or half a stone over a calendar month.

Many nurses would find it impossible to take 2 hours out of their day to walk. But increasing walking time is easier than most people think. Two hours represents about 16% of a 12-hour shift and the solution is for nurses to find ways of taking 10 000 steps during their working day (NHS Choices, 2014). This can be achieved by:

- Getting off public transport earlier than usual and walking the rest of the way home or to work, or walking to the station

instead of taking the car or bus

- Taking the stairs instead of the lift at work
- When not at work, investing in a shopping trolley and shopping locally where possible and walking the children to school
- Buying a pair of lightweight walking shoes and getting fit through walking in open spaces and perhaps joining a walking group.

Therapeutic benefits

There is no doubt that many nurses are prone to stress while working, and mindfulness meditation has been shown to manage this effectively (Galantino et al, 2005).

National parks such as the New Forest offer many opportunities for outdoor activities. A report on practising mindfulness in woods and forests discusses the holistic benefits of walking in rural and wooded environments (Ambrose-Oji, 2013).

'Forest bathing', the Japanese philosophy of *shinrin-yoku*, is a term that means 'taking in the forest atmosphere' and it is an important aspect of preventive health in Japanese medicine (Tsunetsugu et al, 2010). Japanese citizens are encouraged to use forests as therapeutic environments in which to manage stress. Forests are also home for many species of birds and research has indicated that there is a link between such environments and better mental health (Cox et al, 2017).

Health workers who live in urban areas can access the many parks and open green spaces found in most towns and cities.

Conclusion

Walking is becoming an increasingly popular intervention for getting fitter and losing weight, as well as helping with stress. Obesity and stress among health professionals can be mitigated through mindful walking, especially in natural environments. **BJN**

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KEY POINTS

- The health benefits of walking have been subject to stringent research and moderately intensive walking can improve health and prevent weight gain
- Of the 1.2 million staff in the NHS, around 300 000 would be classified as obese and a further 400 000 as overweight
- Nurses and other health workers should aspire to walk 10 000 steps per day
- Mindful walking and 'forest bathing' have been shown to be a therapeutic way of managing weight

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