

Walk for Health

Key Messages

- ※ Walking is a type of physical activity that confers multiple health benefits, including reduced risk of obesity and chronic non-communicable diseases (such as cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes and certain cancers), enhanced mental well-being and increased longevity.
- ※ Adults are recommended to gradually increase their daily step goal to 10 000 based on an individual's own physical conditions, abilities, pace and circumstances. Any amount of walking is better than none, even if the goal cannot be reached yet.
- ※ Those who are used to be sedentary or living with a chronic illness can start out with short distances and slow speeds, and then build up the walking distance and intensity gradually.
- ※ Walking is a great social activity that also helps reducing feelings of loneliness and enhancing quality of life. Let's walk with friends, family members and colleagues and share the walking fun.



Walk for Health

Lack of physical activity is a major risk factor contributing to obesity, chronic diseases and premature deaths. For health and prevention of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends adults aged 18 or above to do at least 150–300 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity, or equivalent amount and intensity of physical activity throughout the week. They should also limit the amount of time spent being sedentary and replace sedentary time with physical activity of any intensity including light-intensity physical activity¹. However, globally 31% of adults do not meet the recommended levels of aerobic physical activity². A study estimated at least 3.9 million premature deaths worldwide could be averted by physical activity annually³. In an effort to ramp up coordinated actions to promote physical activity, the WHO launched Global Action Plan on Physical Activity 2018-2030: More Active People for a Healthier World⁴ in 2018, urging member states to implement appropriate programmes for increasing population level of physical activity^{2, 4}.

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has long been working closely with various stakeholders in promoting physical activity participation. In view of walking being regarded as a practical and easy way to increase population's level of physical activity^{5, 6}, the Department of Health (DH) set up a multi-disciplinary Task Group on Promotion of Physical Activities in 2021 to advise on the planning and implementation of territory-wide social marketing campaign to promote walking. This article reiterates the various health benefits of walking, aiming to urge members of the public to have an optimal 'daily dose' of walking for better health.

Health Benefits of Walking

While any type of physical activity would offer health benefits, walking is an inexpensive and all-round mode of aerobic activity that can be done at any time of day. Beyond a pair of comfortable shoes, walking does not require gym membership, specialised equipment or attire. Compared to scheduled exercise classes or activities, walking can easily be incorporated into everyday life and offers more flexibility for busy individuals. In place of taking the car or other forms of motorised transport, walking can also benefit the environment and help combat climate change with reduced greenhouse gas emission and air pollution.

Walking is called “man’s best medicine”⁷. Epidemiological studies show that walking confers multiple health benefits (Figure 1), including reduced risk of obesity and chronic NCDs (such as cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes and certain cancers), enhanced mental well-being and increased longevity^{8, 9}. For most health outcomes, additional benefits occur as the amount of walking increases through greater frequency (i.e. the number of walking sessions or bouts per day), longer duration (i.e. the length of time for each bout of walking) and/or higher intensity (i.e. the speed of walking). In terms of reduced mortality, taking more steps per day was associated with a progressively lower risk of death¹⁰⁻¹³. In the general adult population, studies showed that each 500 steps per day increment was associated with 7% decrease in cardiovascular mortality¹⁴; each additional 1 000 daily steps was associated with 12–15% lower risk of all-cause mortality^{14, 15}. Independent of sedentary time, the lowest mortality risk was observed between 9 000 and 10 500 steps per day¹⁶. Nevertheless, studies showed that additional health gain in terms of declines in mortality risk became marginal for daily steps more than 10 000^{10-12, 17}.

Figure 1: Health benefits of walking



Taking into account available scientific evidence, overseas and international guidelines as well as the baseline daily step counts of local population, adults are recommended to gradually increase their daily step goal to 10 000 based on an individual's own physical conditions, abilities, pace and circumstances. It can be accumulated in bouts throughout the day. Even if the goal cannot be achieved, any amount of walking is better than none. To get more steps per day, people can walk to or from work, or get off a few stops and walk the rest of the way to the destination when taking public transit; go for walks after lunch or dinner; and take the stairs instead of elevators or escalators. Weekends and public holidays are great for family walks in a park or hill-walking with friends. For more hiking information including hiking route information and safety hints on hiking, please visit the website of 'Hiking Scheme' of the Leisure and Cultural Services Department at www.lcsd.gov.hk/en/healthy/hiking/index.html.

For those who are used to be sedentary or living with a chronic illness, walking is a good starting point to lead an active lifestyle. They can start out with short distances and slow speeds, and then build up the walking distance and intensity gradually. To stay cool while walking in hot weather, walkers are advised to wear loose-fitting and light-coloured clothing, be sun smart (such as applying sunscreen) if walking outdoors, select a route that includes shade or walk in air-conditioned areas (such as shopping mall), choose a cool time of day to walk, stay hydrated and take it easy.

Initiatives to Promote Walking

According to the Population Health Survey 2020-22, 24.8% of local persons aged 18 or above did not perform sufficient level of physical activity¹⁸. To increase public awareness about the benefits of walking and motivate members of the public to walk more, the DH launched the '10,000 Steps a Day Campaign' steered by the Task Group on Promotion of Physical Activities.

On top of mass online and offline publicity, the DH and the Occupational Safety and Health Council co-organised the first Walking Challenge in 2022. Adopting “10,000 Steps for Health” as the slogan, the Walking Challenge aimed to promote walking to adults through workplace and encourage members of the public to increase their physical activities to prevent NCDs. In 2023, the DH organised the second Walking Challenge with the slogan of 'Walk Together for Health and Happiness”, motivating family members to walk together and integrate walking 10 000 steps a day into daily life. Following the successes of aforesaid events, the DH will launch the third Walking Challenge to inspire members of the public to walk with friends and share the walking. Please stay tuned and visit the thematic website: www.10000stepsaday.hk/?lang=en for the updates. The DH will continue using a variety of strategies to raise public awareness about the benefits of physical activity and work closely with relevant stake-holders and community partners in enabling members of the public to walk more.



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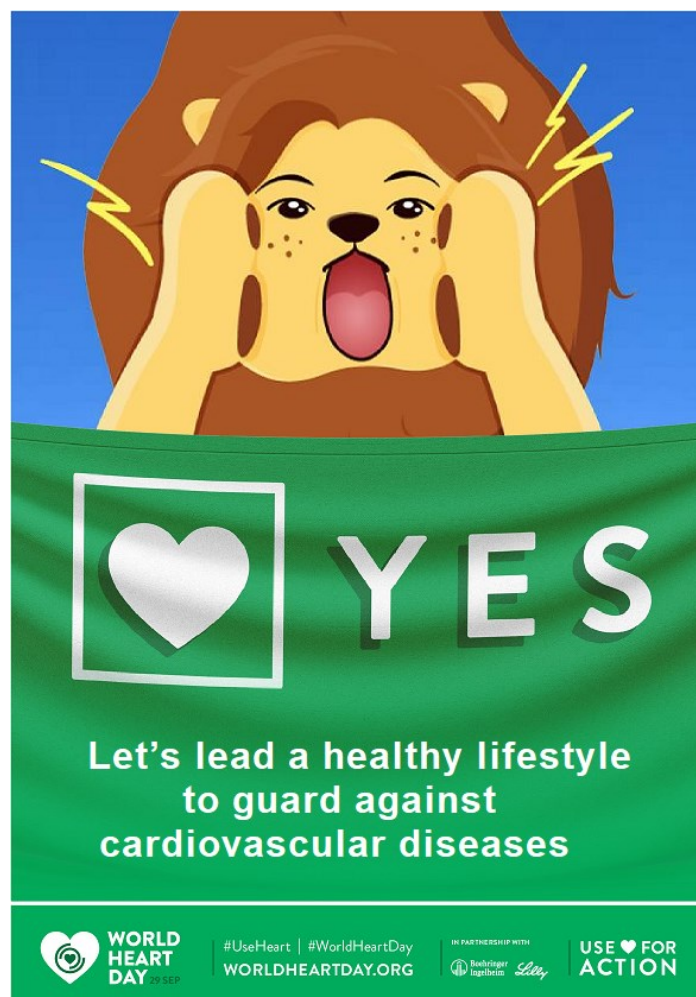
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World Heart Day, held on 29 September annually, is a reminder to everyone around the world to take care of their hearts. For more information about the World Heart Day, please visit: world-heart-federation.org/world-heart-day/.

Cardiovascular diseases (CVDs), including heart disease and stroke, are the leading cause of death globally. Every year, more than 20 million lives are lost because of CVDs. In Hong Kong, there were more than 11 100 registered deaths attributed to CVDs in 2023, including 7 258 deaths due to heart diseases. However, 80% of premature CVD deaths are preventable by limiting risk factors and practising heart-healthy behaviours.

To guard against CVDs, members of the public are urged to lead a healthy lifestyle that includes being physically active; eating a balanced diet with at least five daily servings of fruit and vegetables along with reduction of fat, salt and sugar in diet; no smoking; and refraining from alcohol consumption.



Non-Communicable Diseases (NCD) WATCH is dedicated to promote public's awareness of and disseminate health information about non-communicable diseases and related issues, and the importance of their prevention and control. It is also an indication of our commitments in responsive risk communication and to address the growing non-communicable disease threats to the health of our community. The Editorial Board welcomes your views and comments. Please send all comments and/or questions to so_dp3@dh.gov.hk.

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