Park Walks Toolkit

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Benefits of Walking in London's Green Spaces

There is now overwhelming evidence that regular physical activity, including walking, is one of the best things anyone can do to keep healthy. Also, that spending time in green spaces such as parks and woodlands is good for our mental and physical health. *(Source: An Evidence-Based Approach to Physical Activity. Public Health England, Oct. 2014.)*

Walking in London's parks and woodlands is a great way to take in the views, get some fresh air in your lungs, enjoy the company of friends and travel to different places - even if it's only a local pub or cafe and back!

A Lancet study in November 2019 reported that those participants who walked in parks all showed increased beneficial effects regarding the function of their arteries from walking as opposed to those who strolled down busy streets.

Walking - Walking regularly at any speed will:

- Help manage weight
- Reduce the risk of Type 2 diabetes
- Reduce risk of certain cancers such colon, breast and lung cancer
- Improve flexibility and strength of joints, muscles and bones, and reduce the risk of osteoporosis.
- Increase “good” cholesterol
- Boost the immune system
- Improve mood, reduce anxiety, aid sleep and improve self-image

Managing and recovering from Health problems

Walking can help you manage and recover from certain long term conditions (as part of a care plan supervised by your doctor). Many patients recovering from heart problems find walking is a good way to recover their strength gently and gradually. Walking can help manage the side effects of cancer treatment and even prevent certain cancers recurring.

Mental health and Wellbeing

Walking improves mental wellbeing and helps fight stress and depression. (*Reference Iohannis Bakolis, Ryan Hammoud, Michael Smythe, Johanna Gibbons, Neil Davidson, Stefania Tognin, Andrea Mechelli, Urban Mind: Using Smartphone Technologies to investigate the impact of Nature on Mental Wellbeing in Real Time, published in Bioscience 10 January 2019*). Walking for health provides opportunities for participants to meet new people and form new friendships. This is the top motivator for many participants. This social aspect of health walks also contributes to improving participants’ mental health. A recognised barrier to physical activity is not having someone to

get active with, and a key way of overcoming that is the opportunity to socialise and meet new people. There is also evidence that the social support relationships offered by group-based walking schemes help maintain increased levels of physical activity in the longer term.

- Walking, like other physical activities, releases endorphins which improve mood and reduce stress and anxiety
- Feeling fitter and controlling weight helps improve your body image and confidence
- Active people have a reduced risk of clinical depression
- Walking in a group is a sociable activity that can help improve mental health and overcome feelings of isolation
- Spending time in the outdoors and in contact with the natural environment – for example by walking in parks, woodland and green spaces – can have a positive effect on mental health

Walking is:

- Free and requires no special equipment, training, gym or club memberships
- Available to almost everyone
- Safe and low-impact, with a low risk of injuries and accidents
- Easy to start slowly and build up gradually
- You can walk from your doorstep at a time that suits you
- You can use walking for everyday short journeys
- You don’t need to concentrate on walking itself, leaving you free to enjoy your surroundings, chat to friends, family or just relax
- You can enjoy a variety of surroundings as you walk in different places and different seasons

Walking and Everyday life

For most people, walking is the easiest way to meet physical activity recommendations and fit into your everyday life.

Scents of the Woodland and Park may reduce Stress

A walk in a park or woodland with lots of trees may be the healthiest thing you can do. Scents and smells have a powerful effect on our health and emotions. It seems that smells are closely tied to the emotional center in our brain. This is why certain smells and scents can arouse a sense of nostalgia or other emotions relating to our past.

It's never too late to get active!

Even people who take up physical activity late in life will benefit. One study found that previously inactive men who became active at the age of 50 were 49% more likely to survive to the age of 60 than men who had not previously exercised.

If a medication existed which had a similar effect to physical activity [like walking], it would be regarded as a "wonder drug" or a "miracle cure"' (England's Chief Medical Officer 2010).

Case Study – Jane aged 81 years

Jane, aged 81, had been feeling extremely depressed after losing her husband to cancer so she asked her three friends to come up with a plan to do something different that could help her to cope better. They planned to spend one day a week walking in the outdoors. Their first choice was along the Thames by Westminster Bridge. The noise made it hard to speak and there was too much distraction from tourists and cars. The polluted air did not help.

It was then decided to try Twenty Acre Shaw Woods in Bromley, which Jane had heard about. The experience was special, discovering nature at its best was overwhelming, she felt so energised and less stressed. As a result they have now drawn up a walking itinerary for the next six months which includes a number of the National Trusts parks in the London area as well as key parks and woodlands found online.

Jane's mood has improved enabling her to cope better with her loss and make plans for her future. She feels she can think clearly about addressing all the tasks her husband always did and can express herself better. The combination of the support of her three friends and the peaceful environment that nature is so good at providing has helped her to face her loss and move on with a little bit of confidence.

Frequently Asked Questions and Tips

Q. What are the health benefits of walking?

A. Active people have a significantly reduced risk of a number of serious health conditions.

Q. I’m too old to start a programme of walking in parks?

A. It’s never too late to get active: even people who take up physical activity late in life will benefit.

Q. What if I'm not very active?

A. If you're able to walk, increase your walking distance gradually.

Q. Isn't it sometimes unsafe to walk?

A. Take sensible precautions:

- The best idea is to head for a public place where you know there will be other people
- If you are at all worried, walk with a friend or join a walking group
- It is a good idea to have a mobile phone, a phone card, or some spare change with you to enable you to make a phone call
- Carry things is in a small bag slung across your body under a jacket or coat. Ensure it sits close to your body.

Q. How much walking should I be doing?

A. The UK’s Department of Health guidelines states for general health, adults should do 30 minutes a day of moderate intensity physical activity, on five or more days of the week. However, the 30 minutes of activity can be built up in short walks of 10 minutes or more.

Tips

- *Join a walking group*. It's a great way to start walking, make new friends and stay motivated.
- *Wear the right shoes* - Comfortable walking shoes are necessary. If you have foot problems, you may want to look into some of the key shoe manufactures who specialize in shoes for problem feet. *Perfect Fit for Wider Feet – www.widerfitshoes.co.uk 01933311077 Cosy Feet Extra Roomy – www.cosyfeet.com 01458447275*
- *Do not let your walking stick stop you.* It is all right to use your walking stick if you already have one. These can improve your balance and help take the load off painful joints.
- *Aim for the right pace* - Try to walk as fast as you can, but still be able to chat with a friend while walking.
- *Do not let a health problem keep you from getting started*. You may feel a little stiff and achy as you start walking, but many people feel better once they start moving!
- *Be Aware of your Surroundings* - Plan to walk during the daytime or in well-lit areas in the evenings. Keep an eye out for uneven surfaces, possible obstacles, and other tripping hazards.
- *Keep Hydrated* - Bring a bottle of water with you and be sure to drink plenty of fluids if you sweat. Or better still if there is a café nearby, enjoy a cup of tea and a rest.
- *Dress Properly for the Weather* - If walking outside, wear layers of clothing so that you can take off a layer if you're hot, or put one on if too cold.

How to set up a local walking group

Connecting with existing schemes

Ramblers Walking for Health Schemes -

https://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/walkfinder

Find your local green space – see Resources

Set up a friendly park walking group

- Find your initial core group by chatting with your friends, your local Age UK and family. Try to find others who share your interest in park walks.
- Connect with your local park staff to let them know you are starting a park group (and to learn about others who may be already involved in the park or interested in joining you!)
- Hold your first meeting with a group of core people. Promote your meeting to the broader community by setting up a Facebook page or simple website.
- Host your first public event in the park as a great way to attract new energy and broaden the interest of your new park group. Nature walks, guided park tours or walk/talk and café is a good start.

Resources and Contacts

To Find Your Walk

London is made of 40% public green space, including 3,000 parks and totaling 35,000 acres

Explore the best parks in London: www.visitlondon.com

Nature reserves and woodlands in London: www.visitlondon.com/things-to-do/openspace

Find Health walk schemes in your area

www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/walkfinder/London

Group Walks – Ramblers

Ramblers organise group walks for health, leisure and as a means of getting around for people of all ages, backgrounds and levels of fitness;

www.ramblers.org.uk

https://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/why-walk/keep-walking

https://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/keep-walking/top-tips-stay-motivated

https://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/keep-walking/getting-most-your-walk

https://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/keep-walking/walking-all-weathers

https://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/get-walking/walking-health-conditions

https://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/why-walk/walkers-stories-new

https://www.walkingforhealth.org.uk/get-walking/walking-works

Walk England

Towns and cities offer interesting walks, including parks, heritage trails, canal towpaths, riverside paths, commons, woodlands, heaths and nature reserves. For inspiring walks, visit www.walkengland.org.uk
For wheelchair users, www.walkswithwheelchairs.com

Seven of the best walks in London

www.wanderlust.co.uk/content/7-of-the-best-walks-in-london/

London's Royal Parks - London's eight Royal Parks cover 5,000 acres and are home to more than 170,000 trees.

- Richmond Park, which contains 1,200 ancient trees, as well as herds of red and fallow deer.
- Walk through Greenwich Park and you can see Queen Elizabeth's Oak. This historic tree stood for around 800 years before finally falling in 1991. It was a favoured picnic spot for Queen Elizabeth I and it's said that her parents - King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn - danced around the oak when they were courting.

Ruffet and Big Wood

Escape the city buzz with a trip to this peaceful wood close to Coulsdon, Sutton. Head to the north side of the wood on a clear day and you'll be treated to fine views out across London.

Epping Forest

Straddling London's north-eastern border, Epping Forest is a walker's dream. The vast site contains ancient woodland, grassland, lakes and lots of wildlife. Look out for the many ancient pollarded trees.

Blackbush & Twenty Acre Shaw Woods

This pair of picturesque woods is a stone's throw from the village of Cudham in Bromley. A mixture of ancient and young woodland, beautiful bluebells bloom here each spring. The woods are located close to Down House, home of Charles Darwin. It's likely he would have visited as he worked on his theory of evolution.

Hampstead Heath

One of London's most popular outdoor destinations. This sprawling park offers woodland, meadows, ponds and wildlife. No visit is complete without viewing the city skyline from Parliament Hill.
www.royalparks.org.uk

People with Disabilities

Liberty Drives provide a transportation service free of charge for individuals with disabilities (along with caregivers, friends and family) to visit inside Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens.
www.libertydrives.org.uk

SENSE Golders Hill Park Sensory Walk, London

Sense and The Outdoor Guide have partnered to create two sensory walks in London – 'Giving people the space to explore nature whilst being active.' Sense is a national charity supporting people with complex disabilities. At Sense, we believe everyone, no matter how complex their disabilities, deserves the right to enjoy a physically active life.
www.theoutdoorguide.co.uk/walks/sensory-walks/golders-hill-park-walk-london/

London Gentle Walks

This group is for people who would like to take a gentle stroll in and around London. Walks will be of no more than 5 miles, and with no pressure to take a particular pace - if you want to stop we can stop, if you want to take it slower we can. This might be particularly suitable for people who are just starting out on a fitness regime, those recovering from illness or injury, but really it is for anyone who wants to take life gently!

www.meetup-com/The-London-gentle-walks-group

Winter walks in London and the South East

Discover the magical winter landscapes on your doorstep this season. From the tree-filled valleys of Winkworth Arboretum in Surrey to the watery winter wonderland of Mottisfont in Hampshire - find a place to unwind and enjoy a winter walk in London and the South East.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/lists/winter-walks-in-london-and-the-south-east