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WALKING: ITS OLDER THAN THE WHEEL

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies the importance of walking as an activity and gives information about how to develop a program.

WALKING: ITS OLDER THAN THE WHEEL

They had somethings in common.

A tall young man walking frequently in the rolling fields near Charlottesville, Virginia. Another, similarly rangy, young man walking the streets and hills around Springfield, Illinois. And still another, not so young, but trim man, continuing a practice started in Independence, Missouri, moving swiftly on foot through the streets of Washington, D. C.

What did they have in common? They enjoyed walking, and said their thinking was improved by this exercise. Oh, yes, the Virginian in his meanderings perhaps gave serious consideration to what should be in our Declaration of Independence -- Thomas Jefferson was our third president. The young Illinois lawyer in his regular walks perhaps thought about the unfairness of slavery and that there should be an Emancipation Proclamation. Abraham Lincoln was our 16th president. That vigorous man from Missouri probably used one of his morning walks to reach a momentous decision, to drop atomic bombs on two Japanese cities and bring World War II to an end -- he was Harry S. Truman, our 33rd president.

We have seen that many presidents walked regularly because it was good exercise and stimulated their thinking. Other famous people who walked for similar reasons were writers Henry David Thoreau and Jane Austen. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas was a strong advocate of walking, as also was scientist Albert Einstein.

Is walking the "in thing" to do today?

For many young people walking is the only means to reach stores, school, homes of friends, the bus, and so on. Some of these trips can be made by bicycle or by being driven by a parent, but walking is almost always available.

One can think of this need to walk as an unpleasant thing, but actually walking can have many advantages. There was a time after the automobile became common in this country when nearly everybody rode everywhere. In the last decade, however, walking has become popular again.

Walking is growing in popularity today because many people are concerned about physical fitness and health. And they want to save scarce motor fuel and reduce the pollution due to the motor vehicle.

In the past some people walked to win prizes or wagers. One such walker was Edward Payson Weston. His exploits were in the news around Civil War times. In 1867 he walked 1,326 miles in 26 days. This is an average of 56 miles a day! Weston was a fairly small man but he walked at a steady, rapid pace.

We know that cars go 55 miles per hour on the main highways, and often about 25 mph in cities and towns. But how fast do people, who aren't like Edward Payson Weston, walk? The speed of walking which is called "moderate" is about 3 miles per hour (mph). A faster speed called "brisk" is about 4 mph. If you want to estimate how long it will take to cover a certain distance, you can figure that at a "moderate" walking pace you will cover one mile in 20 minutes. At a "brisk" pace it will require 15 minutes to go a mile.

If many people walked a mile in cities instead of driving, we would save a great deal of money and scarce motor fuel. We can predict this because we know that about one-quarter of all auto trips made in urban areas are less than one mile in length. Of course, if the weather is inclement, or you have poor health, or must carry heavy packages, you may want to go by car; but if you can spare 15 or 20 minutes, you can see that many short auto trips can be replaced by walking.

Walking is an exercise which many people -- not just presidents -- use to improve their physical fitness. In the U.S. more people walk than do any other exercise. One writer said about this: "34 million people can't be wrong." That's the number who walk regularly in the United States.

There was a time when the big goal for teenagers when they reached 16 in most states was to get "wheels," either their own car or to drive their parents'. In recent years a good many are seeing the merits of walking -- good physical bodies, chances to meet others while walking, no hunting for parking places, saving a lot of money, and coming and going when you wish. It's the saying of some that: "Car-free means care-free!"

Most people want to have enough stamina to keep up with their friends and just to feel good. You may want good stamina for dancing, playing sports, and so on. Walking is a good way to start your body build-up, especially after a period of inactivity, such as during illness. Also, because walking can be done in almost any weather you can keep in good condition by several minutes of walking nearly every day.

There is a funny quotation from the writings of Thomas Jefferson in which he advocates walking but also it shows that every era has its challenges due to innovations in transportation. Jefferson said: "Walking is the best possible exercise. Habituate yourself to walk very far. The Europeans value themselves on having subdued the horse for the use of man; but I doubt whether we have not lost more than we have gained, by the use of this animal."

Sometimes children and parents don't communicate very well. When you are around home and the radio or television are on or there are other interferences, it is difficult to converse. But out for a walk, especially in a quiet residential or park area, you can talk easier. The steady pace of walking seems to make it easy for members of a family to exchange ideas. We might say: "The family that walks together talks together."

Walking is a good way to reduce tension. Tension can cause a person to be irritable, nervous, and have headaches. Getting away from the cause of stress is often made possible by walking.

Walking is a rhythmic exercise. The steady left-right, left-right pattern of feet and arms helps you to relax. Also, this exercise increases the supply of oxygen to the body.

If walking can be done in unconstested, natural, settings, flowers and plants and animals can be observed. Here, too, the air quality is usually good. Such settings improve both a person's physical and mental condition.

It may sound sort of ridiculous, but some people don't know how to walk. We assume that walking is almost as natural as breathing. You should walk erect to let the lungs expand. Walk as though you have a crown on your head. You've never seen a Miss Universe or Miss Teen Age America with bad posture. Others, like the Marines, are famous for their posture -- they walk erect, chin in and head up -- a crown would't fall off their heads either.

It's best to walk with your toes pointed nearly straight ahead. And when you move your feet forward, let your heel strike the ground first, then roll on the ball of your foot and push off with your toes -- heel, roll, toes. This will prevent the clumsy, clump-clump, flat-footed gait and strengthen your toe muscles.

One thing about walking, as compared to many sports, is that it is inexpensive. Sidewalks or trails are available nearly everywhere and they are free.

For clothing you can wear old things. It's important to not wear too much, because after a few minutes your body will generate heat and you will be too hot. A solution to this is to dress in layers of light-weight garments. When walking in the fall or spring you might wear a sweater and jacket which you can take off when you start to heat up; or you can let out body heat by opening at the neck or waist.

The question is frequently asked: "What kind of shoes are best for walking?" Fortunately, almost any pair of comfortable, well broken-in shoes will be satisfactory for most people. Because much modern walking is done on hard pavement, some people who have tender feet may want to obtain soles which are shock-absorbing. When you are buying new shoes, be sure that the toe area is quite broad so toes aren't pinched; and the shoes should have laces or straps for adjusting tightness.

Are there any disadvantages of walking? One big disadvantage is that you must use great care to avoid car-pedestrian accidents. Statistics report that about 8,000 die each year in the U. S. in such accidents and many more are injured. In some cities nearly half of those killed in accidents involving motor vehicles are pedestrians.

There are laws about walking and driving, and these should be followed, but obeying the law won't guarantee you a safe trip. You must watch out for possible danger.

Fortunately, most young people have good vision and hearing and the ability to react quickly. All pedestrians, whether old or young, however, need to be alert and watchful because there are some situations where drivers may be driving improperly or where they can't see you or may not have the time to maneuver or stop a heavy vehicle.

Cars moving at 25 mph are going eight times as fast as you are, meaning that you will have to plan ahead in order to avoid being hit by an oncoming car. And if you are walking on highways where speed limits are 55 mph you should realize that the cars are going nearly twenty times as fast!

One way of looking at the pedestrian safety matter is that a person weighing maybe less than 150 pounds shouldn't try to occupy the same space as an automobile weighing probably ten times as much!

Here are some important "Do" and "Don't" suggestions about walking. Some have been mentioned before.

Do wear sturdy, comfortable shoes.

Don't wear too heavy clothing.

Do let a friend or family know where you are going.

Don't walk alone at night.

Do wear bright clothing at night and watch for cars day and night.

Don't walk too far or too fast until you are accustomed to walking.

Do walk some every day!

In many publications today we can read about walking. There are some complete books about walking and many magazine and newspaper articles are available at your local libraries. There was a humorous newspaper article with the title: Yes There's Life Without a Car. In telling about his experience since selling his car the author says, "It hasn't always been easy going without wheels....." But he goes on to extoll some benefits, "No hurry, no traffic congestion, no parking problems, good exercise..." If you were riding in an airliner recently you could have looked in the pocket in front of your seat and found an article in a magazine the title of which makes a good suggestion: Go Take a Walk

Walking is older than the wheel and we are beginning to rediscover it.

COMMENTS

An individual who enjoys life is one who does not distinguish between his work and leisure. He pursues excellence and knows how to satisfy his needs, no matter what the activity.