



How Physical Activity Benefits Your Life

A dream of the North American Division Health Director Dr. Dewitt Williams is for every Adventist to become physically active and experience abundant health. I asked Williams once, "What do you think would make the greatest impact for improved health among Adventists?" He quickly replied, "If every Adventist was physically active!" This year the NAD is taking steps to make this dream a reality.

Dr. Williams appointed Reg Burgess to coordinate this NAD health initiative. Burgess has, in turn, enlisted health and fitness professionals throughout North America and Canada to develop and implement a division-wide, church-based, physical activity program called ***InStep for Life***. Emphasis will be on walking, our nation's most common form of physical activity and an exercise that is safe and effective. The ***InStep*** fitness program will encompass all activities, however, including biking, swimming, running, and active sports.

InStep includes several key principles that have been found to be effective in helping people to become more active:

- **Wear a pedometer and counting daily steps.** Pedometers give you immediate feedback on how active, or inactive, you are. They are great motivators and help you track daily progress.
- **Set a daily activity goal.** This may be taking 8,000 or 10,000 steps daily, walking two miles five days per week, or at least getting 30 minutes of aerobic activity daily.
- **Logging your activity daily** using either a monthly exercise log or calendar, or an online logging program available on the ***InStep For Life*** web site (www.InStepForLife.com).
- **Invite an exercise buddy to join you** on your walk or other activity. It might be your spouse, child, coworker, or a friend in your neighborhood. Think about inviting a neighbor to walk with you daily. What a great opportunity to become better friends and as opportunities provide, sharing your faith. Walk to witness.
- **Take a virtual fitness adventure.** On the ***InStep for Life*** web site you can sign-up for ***GetFit Adventures™*** to make your exercise more interesting. There will be a variety of virtual fitness trips for you to participate in. Some of the trips being planned include: walk the scenic Oregon coast, walk through Palestine in the steps of Jesus, Follow Paul on one of his missionary journeys, or take a historical tour of Adventist Pioneers, all while logging your weekly fitness miles using the ***InStep for Life*** web site.
- **Sign-up for the *InStep for Life* Fitness Newsletter** to stay in touch with all the activities, awards, and fun virtual adventures being planned.

Why is the Adventist church promoting fitness in 2008?

God wants all of us to be in step with him spiritually and physically. In John 10:10 he states, "I've come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." As you study the body and how it is made, it becomes abundantly clear that it was designed to be physically active. The old adage, "Use it or lose it" certainly applies here. If you want good health, you need to be physically active. Let's take a quick look at both inspiration and scientific research on how physical activity can enrich your life.

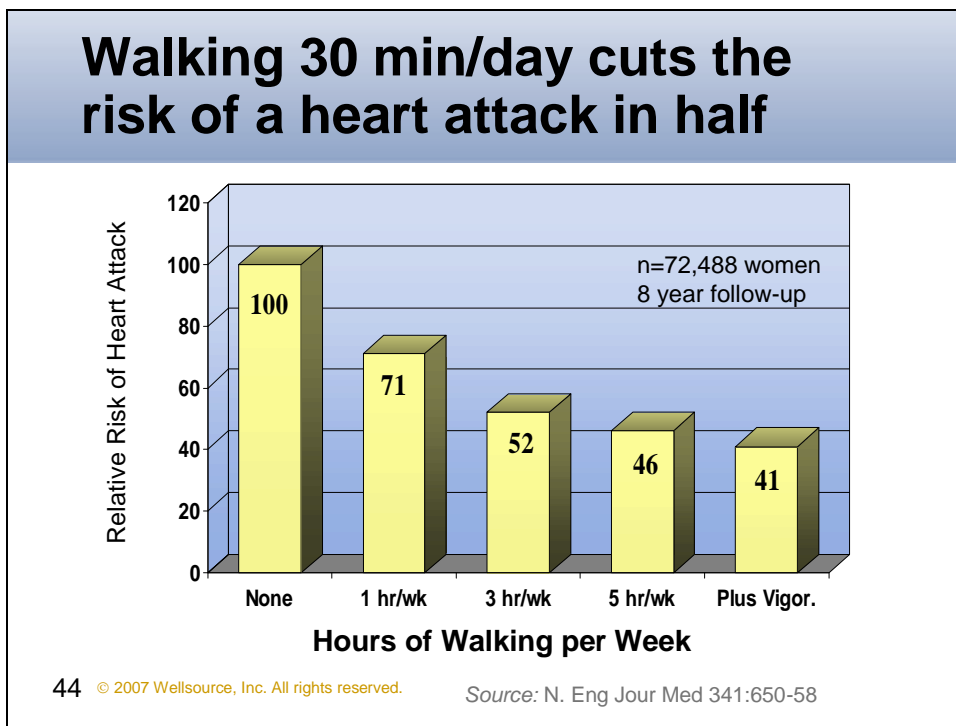
Ellen White in the book *Counsels on Health*, page 52 makes this fascinating statement about exercise, and in particular about walking: "All who can possibly do so ought to walk in the open air every day, summer and winter. A walk, even in winter, would be more beneficial to the health than all the medicine the doctors may prescribe."

Do you believe this statement? Let's take a look at what researchers are finding out about the benefits of physical activity and I think you'll agree that exercise is powerful preventive medicine. For example:

Would you like to prevent cancer? A recent report by the American Cancer Society¹ states that regular exercise may be helpful in preventing breast, colon, prostate, and endometrium cancer, some of the most common causes of cancer deaths today. In a very large study including over 250,000 persons for many years, people who were the most physically active had a 45% decreased risk of death from cancer compared to inactive individuals.²⁵

Interested in preventing diabetes? Type 2 diabetes is one of the fastest growing and most serious diseases today. Doctors estimate that persons born today have one chance in three of developing diabetes in their lifetime. In a 15-year study of 2,478 young adults² (younger than age 30), researchers looked at physical activity and the risk of developing diabetes. Those who were sedentary at the start of the study but became physically active during the 15-year follow-up were 60% less likely to develop diabetes compared to those who remained sedentary. Imagine the impact on the health of our nation and healthcare costs if every sedentary persons became physically active! The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that about 27% of all healthcare costs are linked to a sedentary lifestyle and excess body weight.³

Want to prevent a heart attack? In a Harvard study of 80,000 nurses,⁴ those who walked at least half an hour, five or more days per week, had only half as many heart attacks as those who didn't exercise regularly.



Other benefits. Here are other health benefits shown by large research studies (comparing active or high-fit persons to inactive or low-fit persons):

- Brisk walking cut the risk of hip fracture in older women⁵ by 65% and vigorous activity cut the risk of hip fracture in men^{5b} by 62%.
- Fit men have 68% fewer strokes.⁶
- Physically active men are 57% less likely to develop high blood pressure⁷ than inactive men.
- Fit men are 34% less likely to catch a cold or the flu bug.⁸
- Fit persons have less depression and are happier.⁹
- Fit persons are only half as likely to die from any cause as shown in a large 10-year study.¹⁰
- The American Heart Association and American College of Sport's Medicine²⁴ also suggest that physical activity can be therapeutic for the following health problems: heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, osteoporosis, colon cancer, breast cancer, anxiety, depression, preventing falls, obesity, elevated cholesterol, COPD, dementia, pain, congestive heart failure, back pain, and constipation. If you have health problems, be sure you get your doctor's specific guidance, but isn't it interesting how many health problems exercise is beneficial for, either in prevention or helping manage a serious health problem?

People who get regular physical activity are also less likely to be overweight, have more energy, are more optimistic, sleep better, and have less arthritis and joint pain.¹¹

Active people live longer.

All Adventists look forward to spending an eternity with God. However, God also wants us to enjoy good health and a long life here and now as well. The apostle John reminds us of this fact in his Epistle (3 John 2), "Beloved, I wish above all things that you prosper and be in good health, even as your soul prospers." Adventists were featured in the *National Geographic* magazine recently in an article on long-lived people. We don't smoke; we eat better than the average person, but are we more fit than the average citizen? What would our experience and example be if we were all active? The best way to answer that question is to review what health research is finding. Here are several enlightening studies:

The Adventist Health Study¹² found physical activity to be a top predictor of long life; adding about two additional years for active Adventist women and about three years for active Adventist men compared to inactive Adventists. Keep in mind that physical activity not only adds additional years, but also much higher quality years all your life.

In the Alameda County Study,¹³ a large population study of nearly 6,000 people followed for 10-years, found that physical activity significantly cut the risk of dying compared to an inactive lifestyle. For example, men aged 30-49 who were inactive experienced 3.1 times as many deaths during the nine-year study compared to active men. Inactive women experienced nearly four times (3.9) as many deaths during the study. Which group would you rather be in? It's a choice we make daily, either be actively choosing to be active or by simple neglect.

You don't have to be an athlete to gain these health advantages. A simple walking program done regularly can make all the difference.

The Harvard Alumni Study¹⁴ included some 16,000 graduates of Harvard. A recent 15-year update of this study showed that deaths from any cause dropped in proportion to the amount of physical activity the study participants got (exercise calories expended). People who got regular moderate activity (walked 6-9 miles weekly) had significantly lower mortality levels. Those exercising longer (10+ miles per week) or who also did some vigorous activity regularly lived even longer. The researchers calculated that for every hour Harvard alumni exercised, they increased

their life expectancy by two hours. Not a bad investment! Another interesting finding from the large Harvard study¹⁸ was that persons who were overweight but active had lower mortality rates than healthy weight persons who didn't have a regular exercise program.

Data from the large (5,209 men and women) **Framingham Heart Study**¹⁹ also showed that both moderate and high physical activity increased life expectancy. Compared to inactive men, men who got regular moderate activity lived 1.3 years longer. Men getting high physical activity (more time exercising or higher intensity) lived 3.7 years longer on the average over the 42 years of follow-up in this landmark study. Women had similar results, with an added 1.5 years from moderate activity and 3.3 years from high physical activity added to their life expectancy. This is even longer than the physical activity results found in the Adventist Study. Clearly, being active gives you a longer life. This study also found that active people enjoyed lives free of cardiovascular disease much longer than inactive persons. The researchers concluded with this statement, "Our study suggests that following an active lifestyle is an effective way to achieve healthy aging."

Both the amount of activity and the intensity seem to be protective. If you like to walk, walk briskly. A couple times per week, walk a little longer than usual, or alternate fast walking with regular walking to challenge your body occasionally. Walking up hills is another good way to challenge your body and build higher fitness levels. Just be sure not to overdo, and gradually increase intensity and distance to avoid injury or sore muscles.

NIH-AARP Diet and Health Study.

One of the most fascinating studies showing the benefits of both moderate and vigorous activity on health outcomes is a study sponsored by the National Institutes of Health and the American Association of Retired Persons.²⁵ The study includes over 1.2 million person-years of follow-up. The researchers divided people into one of three groups.

1. Persons reporting 30+ minutes of moderate activity, 5+ days/week (minimum recommended)
2. Persons reporting 20+ minutes of vigorous activity, 3+ days per week
3. Persons getting no regular activity (less than the amounts listed above)

Here is what they found. Compared to the inactive group, persons getting regular moderate activity had a 27% decrease in mortality from any cause over the course of the study (about 5 years). Not bad. Those people who got vigorous activity experienced a 32% decreased risk of death from any cause, and if they met both criteria, they had a 50% decreased risk of dying from any cause.

Next, they looked at specific groups of people at increased risk due to other risk factors, specifically excess weight or smoking. Both smokers and overweight or obese individuals who were active cut their risk of death by over 50% compared to inactive smokers or obese individuals. This is great news. Smokers who can't stop smoking can still cut their risk of dying early in half by becoming physically active. In fact, several studies have shown that smokers who exercise regularly have a lower risk of dying overall than non-smokers who don't exercise regularly.²⁰ That's sometimes shocking news to Adventists. Likewise, overweight or obese persons who can't seem to lose weight can also cut their risk of dying early by half (52%) by getting regular physical activity. The two primary diseases that physical activity showed a decrease in mortality were a 68% decreased risk of heart attacks and strokes, and a 45% decrease in risk of death from cancer.

This is good news to most people! No matter what your problem, it seems that physical activity cuts your risk and protects you against serious illness and early death. Physical activity is almost like an antidote that helps overcome many health problems. In fact, this large study showed that any increase in activity (even levels less than recommended) showed a decrease in mortality. God designed the body to be active and by keeping active throughout your lifetime you reap great health advantages.

Seniors. Even if you are getting older, physical activity is still an important protector against early death from any cause. A recent study of older adults (aged 60 and older) looked at physical activity levels in 2,603 people. Researchers tested their fitness levels by having them do a maximal walk test on a treadmill. This is more accurate and reliable than asking people to report how active they are. After 12 years, researchers looked to see who was still alive and who had died (researchers like this outcome because it's easy to tell which category they are in). Persons who were the most active or fit (top 20%) had a mortality rate less than one-third (30%) that of those who were inactive. This is a remarkable difference. If you want to enjoy your retirement years and play with your grandkids, your chances of survival are more than three times as good if you stay physically active during your older years.

Here are the Physical Activity Guidelines.

The American Heart Association and the American College of Sports Medicine recently issued specific guidelines for physical activity for all Americans. Here is a summary of their recommendations for achieving the remarkable health benefits listed in this article:

- All healthy adults need moderate-intensity aerobic (endurance) physical activity for a minimum of 30 minutes on five days each week or vigorous activity for a minimum of 20 minutes on three days each week.
- Combinations of moderate and vigorous-intensity activity can be preformed to meet these recommendations. For example, you can walk briskly for 30 minutes twice a week and then jog for 20 minutes on two other days. As mentioned earlier, if you meet both criteria, you will experience greater benefits. Other research indicates that people who set an activity goal of getting 10,000 steps daily²³ also show significant health and fitness improvements.
- Moderate-intensity activity is generally equivalent to a brisk walk and noticeably increases the heart rate. You can accumulate your 30 minutes with 10- or 15-minute bouts of exercise if desired rather than doing it all at once.
- Vigorous-intensity activity is exemplified by jogging and causes rapid breathing and a substantial increase in heart rate.
- Because of the dose-response relationship between physical activity and health, persons who wish to further improve their health, prevent disease, or prevent unhealthy weight gain, may benefit by getting additional exercise above these minimum recommended levels. In fact, the American Cancer Society²¹ recommends 45-60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity on most days of the week for best results in preventing cancer. The Institute of Medicine²² recommends at least 60 minutes of moderate activity daily to prevent weight gain, or more if needed. They also recommend at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity for all children daily.
- In addition, every adult should perform activities that maintain or increase muscular strength a minimum of two days each week. Maintaining muscle mass and strength is essential for maintaining function and good health as we get older, and for maintaining healthy bones. It's recommended that eight to ten strength-building exercises be performed on two nonconsecutive days each week using the major muscle groups. For best results, choose a resistance exercise (or weight) that allows eight to twelve repetitions of each exercise that result in substantial fatigue (meaning you don't want to do any more). Examples of muscle-strengthening exercises include weight-training programs, barbell lifting, weight-bearing calisthenics (e.g., pushups and curl-ups), and stair climbing. If you are not familiar with weight training, get a fitness trainer to show you examples. (See examples of weight training exercises at www.wellsource.info ...).
- The guidelines state that it is not necessary for all people beginning a moderate intensity physical activity program to get medical clearance before beginning. However, persons with symptoms or cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, or other active chronic disease should consult a physician or healthcare provider prior to any substantial increase in physical activity, especially vigorous intensity activities.

- Older adults or persons with functional limitations are also recommended to do stretching exercises at least twice a week for a minimum of 10 minutes, to help maintain good function, range of motion, and health of all the joints. (See www.wellsources.info for examples of stretching exercises.)

The benefits of an active lifestyle are clearly impressive. Just knowing these facts, however, will have little effect on our health unless we all put them into practice. If you are active now, great! Keep it up and encourage other church family members to join you in an active lifestyle. If you are not active now, I invite you to consider the benefits and more abundant life God wants you to enjoy. Start where you are. If you haven't exercised for years, don't try to get back into shape overnight. Start at an easy level. Gradually increase your time and intensity until you meet your goal. If you have health problems, get your doctor's specific guidance.

Watch for the **InStep for Life** program coming to your church later this year. It can help you develop an active lifestyle and experience the good health God wants us all to enjoy. Let's let the world know that Adventists not only look forward to Christ's second coming but that we also want everyone to experience the best health and life possible every day.

Plans are that **InStep for Life** will launch with pilot churches, schools, and Adventist institutions later this spring and will launch officially for all churches and Adventist organizations in the autumn of 2008. Be watching for more information on how you can participate. Go to www.InStepForLife.com for further information. You can be getting ready now by being more active every day. Aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate activity, such as brisk walking, most days of the week. Remember God's council to our church more than 100 years ago – a walk in the open air every day will do more for your health than all the medicines a doctor may prescribe! We now have confirming evidence from medical research. Now is the time to put it into practice and begin enjoying the benefits. Happy walking!

Written by Don Hall, DrPH, CHES, an InStep volunteer. Dec.31, 2007 (3,200 words without references)

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