

Step Up!

by Barb Gormley

Pedometers are getting people hooked on walking.

Three evenings a week, Roslyn Hayes grabs her MP3 player, snaps on her pedometer and steps out the door for a brisk evening walk. The combination of upbeat music and the positive feedback from her step counter has her hooked on walking. "Wearing a pedometer makes walking fun," says Hayes, a 49-year-old Windsor, ON, dental hygienist who says she loves gadgets. "I'm constantly checking it to see how many steps I've taken and trying to beat yesterday's total."

Got your pedometer yet? Across the country, people of all ages are clipping these easy-to-operate tracking devices to their waistbands and racking up the steps.

A big part of their appeal is the instant gratification they provide, says Dr. James Mandigo, associate professor of physical education and kinesiology at Brock University in St. Catharines, ON. "Pedometers work so well because they give instantaneous feedback, the same way video games do. You always know how you're doing, and this builds your confidence."

Personal trainer on your hip

Many of us think we're more active than we really are, say the experts. But research reveals the sorry truth: almost half of Canadians age 12 and older walk less than 30 minutes a day. But there's no fooling a pedometer. The number on your hip tells you just how energetic or sluggish you've really been.

"I actually use mine as an *inactivity* monitor," says Lee-Anne Kennedy of Steps Counts, a Canadian company that specializes in pedometers and other health promotion resources. "When I check it and see I have only 2,000 steps, I know I've been sitting too long and that I need to get up and get moving."

Experts often cite 10,000 steps per day as a standard target, but Kennedy believes this may be too lofty a goal for many. (She estimates that the average non-exerciser walks only 3,000 to 4,000 steps per day.) Instead, try to increase your current activity



level by 500 steps, she advises. And if you're just getting started, don't worry about speed. Simply moving more is a step in the right direction.

Every step counts

Consciously adding extra bits of exercise – like walking instead of driving to do errands and striding across the office to deliver a message instead of emailing – can significantly affect your day's step total and ultimately your health. And, of course, the steps you take while playing fetch with the

dog, kicking a soccer ball with your kids and making dinner in the kitchen, all count as well.

When it comes to the benefits of walking, there are no arguments here. "Research consistently shows that walking can decrease your blood pressure, help you manage your weight, and boost your energy and sense of well being," says Kennedy, who is also a registered nurse.

Shop wisely

There's a wide choice of pedometer models and brands on the market. Look for these features when you're shopping.

- **Accuracy** - Do the "20-step test" to see how your pedometer rates. Simply reset it to zero, and take 20 steps. An accurate pedometer will record 19 to 21 steps, a +/- 3% margin of error.

- **Quality** - Batteries in poor-quality pedometers can last as little as one month. High-quality products have a five-year battery and a one-year warranty. Poor-quality pedometers are often too sensitive (and record arm movements, for example) or not sensitive enough.

- **Cover** - A hard cover protects the face of the device and provides a surface for labeling it with your name and phone number.

- **Safety strap** - If you wear thin yoga-type pants or play high-energy activities like soccer or volleyball where you might get bumped, a safety strap will keep the pedometer from falling off if it becomes unclipped.

- **Bright colour** - A good product with a safety strap shouldn't fall off. But if it does, a bright-coloured pedometer is easier to spot on the ground or in the grass. □

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