

## Walk away the winter blues

by *Sandra Hartley, Ed.D.*

Look out your window during the winter months. You may see people out there walking for health and fitness – are they crazy? What is healthy about freezing your feet off, breathing cold air, and possibly slipping on ice? The risks are clear; the benefits are not...right?

Research shows that winter is a key seasonal barrier to maintaining fitness for Canadians of all ages. Is it that important to overcome these winter constraints? Why not just take it easy until summer returns? Why mess with winter?

The answer is, if you cut back or quit being active in winter, you will lose momentum. You could get discouraged. Plus, your energy will wane and you have a tough time getting back on track.

Maintaining your hard-earned health and wellness is totally worth the struggle. Less sunshine, heavier meals, and less physical activity all lead to the ‘winter blahs’. Keeping active in winter will keep you feeling and doing better.

But we need to find safe ways to keep moving in winter. Walking outdoors in winter is a skill – don’t kid yourself that it is easy. And just like for winter sports, you need the proper equipment, especially when there is snow or ice on the ground.

### **Dress for comfort**

- Dress warm from head to toe.
- A neck warmer or fleece scarf can be pulled up over your nose and mouth if the temperature is harsh.
- Ski goggles protect your eyes and improve your vision if the wind is chilly or snow is falling.
- Keep your walking gear together near the door, in a spot where it is easy to find and where it can dry out after each use.



- If you plan to be out an hour or more, pack a small backpack to hold your scarf, mittens, sun glasses, lip balm, water bottle. A snack bar might come in handy too.

### **Plan for safety**

- If you are not able to clear your sidewalks yourself, make arrangements with a neighbour, friend, or family member to ensure they are safe for you.
- Choose a route that has fairly flat terrain. Walk on grass if the pavement is frosty.
- Do NOT leave the step of your home until you have good traction! Heavy tread on winter boots makes for good traction. So do snow cleats on the bottom of your boots, which you can purchase at a hardware stores. Use a ski pole (two are better) or walking sticks with ice picks at their ends.
- Walk in full daylight, or under well-lit streetlamps.
- Carry a head lamp for late afternoon walks.
- Carry a whistle in your pocket to blow, should you ever need help.

## Enjoy it!

- Take your time and enjoy the world around you, but remember to keep your focus on your route and what is happening under your feet.
- Keep your knees supple and relaxed as you move forward. When it is slippery, take smaller steps.
- Walking with a friend adds interest and helps to keep you motivated.
- Enjoy the fact that you got out there!

If the outdoors is not your thing, consider walking ‘laps’ in a large shopping mall. You may be surprised that many older adults prefer this type of winter activity. So you may have lots of company, and a coffee shop is often the reward for a mall walking workout!

About the Author: Sandra Hartley, Ed.D., Exercise Gerontology, Professor Emeritus, University of Alberta