A short guide to engaging GPs and other health professionals
Walking for Health is an activity that is particularly suitable for inactive people and those with long term health conditions. We know that many schemes would like to do more to engage local health professionals and promote walks to this audience.

We have recently been working on a pilot project which aims to establish a signposting mechanism to help GPs and other health professionals identify suitable patients and tell them about their local scheme. We’ve also been speaking to schemes who have existing relationships with health professionals in their area.

This short guide contains some useful information and tips that we’ve learned from this project that we wanted to pass on to all Walking for Health schemes.

We’ll be adding more information to the guide as the project develops, alongside case studies and other resources.

Got a question about our signposting project?
Email: walkingforhealth@ramblers.org.uk
Before making contact...

Be realistic about what your scheme can provide and what’s involved to establish a successful relationship.

It can take time
Unsurprisingly, it can take time to form a meaningful relationship with those involved in the running of a practice. It’s important to be realistic about the time you have available to invest, and how long it will take to establish a relationship that results in patients being signposted to your walks. It may for instance be a couple of months before people start being signposted to your walks.

Have a clear offer
Have a clear offer of how you want to engage the practice. For instance, if you have a short walk near the practice, tell them about this rather than providing your full walk programme. Are you willing to trial a walk starting near the practice? Explain how this might work, and what input is needed from the health professional to make it successful.
Before making contact...

*Think strategically about approaching health professionals. It can pay off to go ‘beyond the practice’ to meet enthusiastic people who want to signpost to your walks.*

**Enthusiastic health professionals**

Are often key to driving a relationship and helping sustain it by acting as ‘champions’ and encouraging other practice staff to tell their patients about your walks. Identifying health professionals with a particular enthusiasm, rather than approaching your nearest practice, may be an effective approach. In order to make connections with these health professionals you may need to think ‘beyond the practice’.

**Beyond the practice**

Some successful relationships have started after linking in with an interested GP or other health professional on Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn, at a local networking event or similar.

It might also be a good idea to contact:

- **Your local CCG** and ask to be put on their mailing list to hear about useful events
- **Your local County Sport Partnership network** who may be able to help you develop links with GP clinical champions and other useful networks
- **The practice’s patient participation group** - whose details may be on the practice website.
Making contact...

*Some simple, practical pointers can help you make the most from that initial contact.*

**Be persistent**
If you don’t hear back immediately, send another email or phone them again, and you could try to set a deadline for responding. Health professionals are used to fielding enquiries and are often very busy, but there’s also no point continuing to try engage someone who isn’t interested. Be clear about the type of response you expect, but try not to bombard them with requests.

**Tailor your initial contact**
We’ve found that health professionals and other practice staff respond better when addressed directly. Find the name of the practice manager or lead GP online, and tailor your contact so that it directly addresses the individual. You could phone up the practice and ask to speak or arrange a call with them, or write or email them directly.

**Arrange a face-to-face meeting**
This can help move things along quicker and can help build trust between you and the practice. You can also ask if the practice manager or other backroom staff can be present, as they can play an important role in telling patients about the walks, and ensuring that everyone in the practice is aware of them.
Talk about the benefits of your scheme and being active.

You can let the scheme know how walk leaders can support new walkers, and the benefits that your scheme can bring to the practice.

Many health professionals are knowledgeable about the benefits that walking can have for patients, however some still aren’t aware of the Chief Medical Officers’ guidelines for physical activity.

You can use the guidelines to demonstrate the benefits of walking. You may also want to talk about the savings that can be made to the practice.

For more information about the benefits of walking, visit our Walking Works website section.

Our Monitoring and Evaluation website section also contains useful information which can help you make the case for why health professionals should refer to your scheme.
Using materials

_Having the right materials is useful for both patients and practice staff._

Make sure your materials are clear and to the point. Health professionals want things to be simple so that they can save time when telling patients about your walks.

We’ve developed some editable materials for our signposting project which _you can download here_. These include flyers, posters, a powerpoint slide (for waiting room screens) and a colour booklet.

It helps to be flexible with what you can provide - as different practices may want certain types of materials or different sizes. Contact _wfhcomms@ramblers.org.uk_ if you have any design requests.
Other things to consider

Empower the practice - be flexible
The practice may have their own interests or priorities, and the challenge might be to find an arrangement that is achievable and meets the needs of the practice.

In our experiences some practices have been keen to start or trial a walk directly from the practice location. If it’s not possible for you as a scheme to accommodate this, it might be possible for you to train the practice staff so that they can lead the walk themselves, which will then be part of your scheme.

Practices involved in the pilot process have also suggested that they would like to offer other walk variations – such as a walk and talk with practice GPs, or a buggy walk setting off from a local scheme.

Speak to us and other Walking for Health schemes!

Contact us

Visit our Engaging Health Professionals webpage for more information and resources
Acknowledgements

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