

Social prescribing and Walking for Health



An England-wide programme of free, regular, community based group walks

Walking for Health is open to all. However, with its focus on short accessible walks, it is suitable for participants with restricted mobility or fitness; people with declining health who want to remain active but at reduced levels; people new to physical activity, and people recovering from ill health. Walks last between 10-90 minutes and are graded depending on their level of difficulty.

A trusted walk programme

Over 400 health walk schemes across the country are accredited and required to meet national programme standards. Accreditation ensures that everyone who comes into contact with Walking for Health has a quality experience. All walks are risk assessed and meet the national definition of a health walk, and schemes must have a satisfactory volunteer policy or volunteer management practices in place.

“It’s great to be able to refer to something that is accredited by the national Walking for Health programme, it gives you confidence that it’s safe, walk leaders are well trained and insured. It gives security to health professionals as well as participants.”

Hayley Burgoyne, Social Prescribing Facilitator, St Austell Health Care

Health and social care professionals are well placed to help Walking for Health schemes reach people who would most benefit from taking part.

Participants signposted from a health care setting to their local health walk are more likely to be from key groups who would benefit from becoming more active, including people who are currently inactive, people living with a long term health condition or disability including cancer, people from BME groups and those from the most deprived areas.

Walks are always free, and schemes can often be flexible in their offer to suit local health care needs, for instance through trialling short walks that start and finish at a health care setting.

Physical health benefits

Walking has been described as the activity with “the greatest potential for increasing the overall activity levels of a sedentary population”¹ and “the most likely way all adults can achieve the recommended levels of physical activity”.²

Walker - Graham, Stockport

Graham was referred to his local scheme in Stockport, after being diagnosed with type-2 diabetes.

“As a result of joining the walking group and the activities that this inspired I have lost 2.5 stone in weight, lost 6 inches off my waist and chest... My blood sugar is now below diabetes levels and I no longer take medication. The walks have enabled me to become more positive, and a better carer to my wife”

Mental wellbeing benefits

Evaluation evidence highlights that participation can increase wellbeing and can help people cope with some of the factors that negatively impact on mental health.^{3,4}

Walker, with a short walk scheme in Bradford

A short walk in Bradford was set up specifically to engage women from the local Pakistani community. One walker joined the group after recovering from illness, and was amazed at the impact the walks had on her mental, as well as physical, health.

“I wanted to get out and about but I had never felt confident walking on my own. I wanted a support group around me and the walking group did that. It was something so small as going for a walk every day that really lifted my spirits”

Social wellbeing benefits

Group walks provide a sociable activity that connects communities and reduces social isolation.⁵ The walks provide a regular opportunity to ‘get out of the house’ and see other people, and benefit from contact with the green environment.

A recent national evaluation found statistically significant improved scores for measures of loneliness and social interaction.

Wilma Bot, Wellbeing linkworker, Tower Hamlets

In Tower Hamlets, Wellbeing Linkworkers refer patients to health walks across the borough.

“Many of the people we refer to the walks are socially isolated, and you can see what a difference it makes to them, the walkers are so welcoming to others”

Use our WalkFinder to find schemes in your area
www.walkingforhealth.org.uk

Contact the national team
walkingforhealth@ramblers.org.uk



¹ Hillsdon M, Thorogood A 1996, 'A systematic review of physical activity promotion strategies', Br J Sports Med 30:84-89

² National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) 2012, Walking and cycling: Local measures to promote walking and cycling as forms of travel or recreation, PH41, <http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ph41>

³ South, J., Giuntoli, G., Kinsella, K., Carless, D., Longa, J and McKenna J. (2017) 'Walking, connecting and befriending: A qualitative pilot study of participation in a lay-led walking group intervention'. Journal of Transport & Health, online edition January 2017.

⁴ France, J., Sennett, J., Jones, A., Fordham, R., Williams, J., Burke, A., Meierkord, A., Fong Soe Khioe, E. and Suhrcke, M. (2016) Evaluation of Walking for Health. Final Report to Macmillan and the Ramblers. London: Walking for Health. Available from www.walkingforhealth.org.uk

⁵ Hanson, S and Jones, A. (2015) Is there evidence that walking groups have health benefits? A systematic review and meta-analysis. Norwich: University of East Anglia.