

Be Active and Keep Fit
TEACHERS TAKING ACTION
by Kathy Burford

All too often, we are reminded of the environmental, genetic, and lifestyle factors that reflect disease. We often have good intentions to take better care of ourselves but fail to take action. Increasingly, we are aware of the danger signs that beckon us to pay attention to our lifestyles and to make changes, but we sometimes don't pay attention. High blood pressure, high cholesterol, migraines, arthritis, insomnia, and exhaustion are a few health problems that come to mind.

At the same time, we see the effects of rapid change and the demands that have been placed on our over-stretched teaching population. Just this year, there has been an overall increase in the use of benefits from the teachers' health plan, and a one third increase in benefits for long term disability. And the number of deaths of teachers in their mid-forties to early fifties has doubled compared to last year's statistics. We have to be aware of our choices and be determined not to be one of next year's statistics.

The World Health Organization stated in 1946 that, "Health is a condition of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of illness or disability." Wellness, a lifestyle concept that has been around for the past few years, bears a striking resemblance with this definition of health stated over 50 years ago. It includes a number of dimensions such as: physical activity, stress management, environmental sensitivity and nutritional awareness. And, at the center of these dimensions, is self responsibility. It is not only living and reacting to illness, but being pro-actively involved in the choices that will help you strive for optimum health. Lifestyle choices and actions are under our control, like deciding how and when to exercise, what to eat, how we perceive ourselves, being vigilant to environmental concerns, and being aware of our attitudes towards illness and health.

We can do something to increase our resilience, improve our health and well-being, and boost our immune system to cope with the effects of change and demands of living by examining our attitudes about health and wellness. If we know that overweight, inactivity, junk foods and the over-consumption of drugs and tranquilizers are not beneficial to our health, why do we continue down the slippery slope of mediocre health or ill-health? Do we over-rely on others, i.e. physicians, hospitals, to step in and take care of us when we encounter health problems instead of taking actions that would increase our ability to fend off ill-health? Do we place obstacles in the way of taking self responsibility by thinking there isn't enough time; that we have bad genes; have a lack of money or information? Or is it just a lack of interest in optimal health and no belief that we have some measure of self-responsibility in how we feel. If one were to ask why there is a lack of interest in wellness, we might hear that the information is boring, or that exercise is boring or too time consuming, or that the lifestyle toward wellness takes too much time, effort, and sacrifice. If given choices, no one would prefer being faced with premature death, heart disease, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, stroke, colon cancer or depression as a result of a sedentary lifestyle over having a good life and being well.

Let us turn our attention to the benefits of planned and purposeful activity before we begin putting together a plan that reflects our own needs and circumstances. Any form of exercise can play a role in preventing heart disease and will benefit your heart in its ability to pump blood to your working muscles and help your muscles make use of the oxygen from your blood. Research has shown further benefits include better health, improved fitness and weight control, a better self image, lower stress, improvements to sleeping, and the ability to relax.

One recent study of 700 people reported improved sleep for those who exercised once a week. In another study it was shown that walking helps people with osteoarthritis. And women who are in menopause, walking helps improve bone loss associated with osteoporosis. If you are a golfer, walking while golfing 18 holes will burn off about 470 calories. You will see an improvement in muscle tone in your thighs in just a two week period if you start walking a 15 minute mile at least three times a week. You are getting the workout you need when you challenge your heart and lungs (breathing is labored but you are not out of breath). Any active workout will send more oxygen to your brain increasing your alertness capacity.

According to Canada's Guide for Physical Activity, an activity plan can include walking golfing, skating, gardening, cycling, continuous swimming, tennis, dancing or climbing stairs. To get the maximum benefit, you need to plan an activity that will increase your heart rate and do it 4-7 days a week. Physical activity will increase your endurance, your

flexibility, and strength. Even a long workout of 40-60 minutes may seem like a daunting task if you have been inactive. Instead, start with shorter periods of 10 minutes each and work your way up to longer periods. Walking may also be a good activity to start with if you have been inactive and are not predisposed to taking part in strenuous exercise.

Generally, when you begin a fitness walking program you should start with three 20 minute sessions per week. Depending on the regularity, walking will help in improving your overall fitness. It will also help you lose weight if you walk at a moderate pace five times a week for 45-60 minutes. For maximum benefit to burn off calories and to lose weight, your walks need to be of longer duration and sustained for at least three months. To help maintain weight, walking at a moderate pace three to five times a week for 20-45 minutes will show benefits. Walking will also help reduce stress and tension and improve your cardiovascular health by reducing the risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, and other chronic illnesses usually associated with a sedentary lifestyle.

In the workplace, The Canadian Council for Health and Active Living at Work has seen encouraging signs of employers supporting and encouraging employees throughout the country to get active. Employer support comes from the notion that healthy employees are more productive and are sick less often. This is a positive payoff for not only the employee but the employer as well. While some work sites have set up fitness areas or paid memberships in health clubs, others have introduced programs that encourage more physical activity. Other creative efforts include educational sessions on health, wellness and fitness to motivate those in the workplace to get active. Contests and challenges also motivate and provide rewards for those who participate.

Some suggestions for staying healthy and fit include:

- Purposeful and sustained aerobic activity at least three times a week for a 30 minute period, e.g. walking, bicycling, hiking, gardening, swimming.
- Designing an activity that is realistic and one that you know you will enjoy.
- Having a walking companion to walk with you. Since some people start an activity alone and with the best intentions, they often find it hard to sustain alone.
- When you reach your goal, whatever it is, reward yourself.
- Check with your physician (a must if you have been inactive) about what level of physical exertion is safe for you.
- A plan for warm-up stretching and cool down periods before and after your activity is important. If in pain, you may have to cut back on the amount of exertion you thought you were up for. If for some reason, you sustain an injury, give yourself time for the injury to heal rather than forcing yourself back into activity that might aggravate the healing process.

Start experiencing the benefits of optimal health in all areas of your life-at home, at school and in your community. Encourage others to join you since activities started alone are harder to keep one's motivation alive. Have a happy, healthy summer and enjoy whatever form of walking or exercise you decide upon. Once you start, you will reap the benefits, feel better, and be on the road to better health.

[Kathy Burford](#) is an EAP Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for teachers. For confidential assistance contact Kathy Burford (ext. 242), or [Claudette Coombs](#) (ext. 265).