

You Can Lead Your Patients To Pills, But Can You Make Them *Walk*?

By Gary Scheiner MS, CDE

For patients with metabolic syndrome, the need to increase physical activity is paramount. Muscle activity brings about a host of metabolic changes that get to the root of many problems: insulin resistance, hypertension, obesity, hypercholesterolemia, and atherosclerosis to name a few.

When it comes to prescribing and motivating patients to exercise, two main categories should be considered: Patients who can engage safely in weight-bearing activity, and those who cannot. The latter category includes those with advanced peripheral vascular disease, significant peripheral sensory neuropathy, unresolved lower extremity infection/injury, or issues with balance. For these individuals, nonweight-bearing activities such as stationary cycling, water exercise, upper-body weight lifting and use of armchair aerobics videos can serve as excellent options.

For the majority who can participate in weight-bearing activity, the simple act of walking may be all that is needed. In the Diabetes Prevention Program, walking at least five days per week for at least 30 minutes led to significant weight loss and reduction in diabetes risk.

Playing devil's advocate, you might say that many patients simply don't like the concept of "exercise." Their schedules are too busy to block out significant time to walk each day, and their moribund fitness levels would never allow them to walk for 30 minutes anyway. Guess what? That's OK. Walking need not be viewed as "exercise" in the traditional sense. It is something that can be done just about anytime, anywhere, in any amount. Other than a decent

pair of shoes, it does not require any special equipment. Or does it?

Clip-On Motivation

I am amazed at what pedometers can do to motivate people to walk. These simple, inexpensive clip-on devices that track daily steps serve as a constant, subtle reminder that movement is both necessary and good.

A study conducted at the Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center in La Crosse, Wisc. provides some data on the topic. Participants were provided with pedometers and encouraged to walk at least 10,000 steps daily. The results indicated that 80% of the participants gained an increased awareness of their daily activity, 66% recognized the need for more exercise, and 36% actually increased their level of physical activity during the study. Those who set specific step goals had a significantly higher increase in physical activity than those who did not. Researchers concluded that wearing a pedometer is a simple, noninvasive way to increase awareness of daily activity, and wearing it does lead to increased activity.

Of course, there is no magic to the number 10,000, although this represents roughly five miles (or 90 minutes) of walking throughout the course of an entire day. For those who are moving very little now, accumulating 3,000 or 4,000 steps in a day might represent a major accomplishment. For those with significant weight-loss needs, 12,000 to 15,000 might ultimately be necessary. Regardless, for patients with metabolic syndrome, more walking is good.

To get your patients walking more, there are three things you can do:

1. Put pedometers on their butts. Actually, on their hips. This is not as hard to accomplish as it might seem. Many pharmaceutical companies give the things away by the truckload at trade shows. Ask your reps to supply you with a quantity of them, or to underwrite the purchase of a few hundred (basic models usually cost \$15 to \$25). If necessary, ask the managed care companies with which you participate if they can provide them—many are willing to do so.

2. Give your patients some pointers. Set a specific step goal for each patient, and provide some strategies for helping them to get there. Again, for those who are barely moving now, a daily step goal of 4,000 might do the job initially. For those who are already moderately active, try 6,000 to 8,000 steps. For those who are quite active and are serious about weight loss, 10,000 to 12,000 is in order. As patients come in for follow-up, increase their daily step goals appropriately. A 1,000 or 2,000 daily step increase is reasonable for those who are meeting their current goal.

As for reaching the step goals, remember that all movement counts, not just walking. Getting up, shifting positions and changing directions all add to the step count. Patients should put the pedometer on first thing in the morning and wear it until bedtime. Have them write down their step counts whether they met their goal or not. Tell them to keep the pedometer horizontal (parallel with the ground) and attach it to the waistband either on their side or in line with a kneecap.

To increase step counts, have your patients try the following:

- Check the step count throughout the day. Seeing a low count often motivates people to do more walking.

- Use a cordless phone, and walk while talking.
- When meeting with friends, walk & talk together rather than just sitting.
- Use stairs instead of elevators and escalators. One minute climbing stairs will account for almost 150 steps!
- For errands near home, walk rather than drive.
- Walk on moving walkways rather than just standing.
- Find the furthest possible parking spot at offices buildings and shopping centers.
- Go down every aisle in grocery stores, even if you only need a few things.
- Get a dog and walk him two or three times a day.
- Get a treadmill and walk on it slowly while watching TV.
- Do your own basic yard work and house work. Gardening and painting will net 70-80 steps per minute.
- Instead of going out to movies or shows, do something active like dancing or bowling. Dancing will accumulate 90-100 steps per minute!
- Hide the remote control; get up to change channels!

3. Incentivize your patients yourself. People love to be recognized for their accomplishments, and most love to compete. Have your patients call in (or fax or e-mail) their daily step counts, and keep a chart in the office to track their cumulative steps. For confidentiality reasons, ask your patients for a “code name” to be used on the chart. Perhaps you could pit the men against the women, or the under 60 year olds against the over 60 year olds. If you really want to get creative, create a token economy whereby X-steps can be redeemed for prizes. Or plot a map and use labeled pushpins to move each person across the country (www.rx4betterhealth.com offers this type of tracking service for free). Prizes can be offered to those who accumulate the most steps,

maintain a minimum step count for the most days in a row, or show the biggest improvement from one visit to the next.

Whatever you chose to do, this is your chance to get creative. And creativity is needed, because traditional medical care is not enough to combat metabolic syndrome.

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