

Heart Disease and Stroke in Canada

by Meredith Cox, 4th year Dalhousie University Health Promotion Intern working with the Heart and Stroke Foundation in Nova Scotia.

Remarkable progress has been made tackling cardiovascular disease in Canada over the past 60 years with death rates declining by more than 75 per cent. This has largely been due to research advances in surgical procedures, drug therapies, and prevention efforts. Yet despite our progress, heart disease and stroke remain leading causes of death and hospitalization and the biggest driver of prescription drug use in Canada. Overall, an estimated 1.6 million Canadians are currently living with heart disease or the effects of stroke. However, up to 80 per cent of premature heart disease and stroke can be prevented by adopting healthy behaviours, and doing so can delay the onset of heart disease or stroke by as much as 14 years.



Walking to Reduce your Risk

The simplest and easiest way to reduce your risk for heart disease and stroke is to get moving. Walking is a great place to start. Not only does it work to boost health and energy but it's easily incorporated into your lifestyle. Walking not only benefits your heart, but it also results in improved fitness, muscle tone, strength, and balance. Walking also trains your heart, lungs, and muscles to work more effectively; reduces pollution by reducing an unnecessary number of car trips; improves sleep, relieves stress and helps combat depression. Research has found that just 30 minutes of light- to moderate-effort physical activity (such as walking) each day will lower your risk of heart disease and stroke. The activity doesn't have to be non-stop, like an aerobics class. Break it up into three 10 minute walks if that works best for you. For example, take a brisk 10 minute walk during lunch hour, play for 10 minutes with your kids after work, and then spend another 10 minutes walking the dog in the evening. If you're short on time, remember that any physical activity is better than none. The more active you are, the greater the health benefits. And as an added bonus, physical activity will give you more energy and help you cope better with your busy schedule.

Heart&Stroke Walkabout™

Walking, you might say, is an essential ingredient to leading a healthy life. But, we all need support. That's why a provincial walking initiative – called Heart&Stroke Walkabout™ – was launched in Nova Scotia in 2007. Walkabout is aimed at supporting all Nova Scotians, regardless of age, size, ability or fitness level, to be more active. With support from the Department of Health and Wellness and the Ecology Action Centre, Walkabout works to engage communities, workplaces, and schools to get their feet back on the streets and put walking in people's hearts and minds.

Walkabout is also a great resource for individuals to use to track their own personal successes. On Walkabout's interactive website, members can set personal walking goals, join walking challenges, map their favourite walking routes, and track their steps. For those that enjoy other forms of physical activity—such as swimming, skating, golf, or even yard work—the website can convert minutes spent doing these activities into steps. If you are not sure of how active you are each day, using the Walkabout website can help track your physical activity levels over time, and can help you identify how you can improve. For further motivation, Walkabout members can purchase a pedometer at a



discounted rate to track their daily steps. Thanks to a partnership between Heart&Stroke Walkabout™, Nova Scotia Public Libraries, and C@P Sites, pedometers can also be borrowed from public libraries across the province free of charge.

In an effort to inspire Nova Scotians to step up and lead walking groups and initiatives in their own workplaces and/or communities, the Heart and Stroke Foundation also offers unique walking programming, including *Walkabout at Work* and *Community Walkabout*. These programs offer leader training and provide resources to engage workplaces and communities to start walking clubs, hold fun challenges, and to consider policy which can support physical activity. Why walk alone when you can walk with others?

In 2011, Heart&Stroke Walkabout introduced the *Walkability Awards*, which are a celebration of the people and organizations that are making communities and other environments more walkable in Nova Scotia. Through their actions, they are contributing to a culture of walking in Nova Scotia. In addition to the *Walkability Awards*, Walkabout also offers *Walkability Grants* on an annual basis. These grants support community groups, organizations and individuals who are taking steps to increase walking and improve safety in Nova Scotia.

Lace up and Get Walking!

Now that you're familiar with the many benefits of walking, consider the ways in which you could incorporate more physical activity into your daily routine. Be sure to check out Walkabout at www.walkaboutns.ca to become a member and record your progress! Here are some ideas for increasing the steps you take every day:

- Park your car further away from your destination.
- Walk your children to school.
- Walk your dog (or a neighbour's dog).
- Take a walk with a friend or co-worker at lunch.
- Take the stairs.
- Start or join a walking club.
- Wear your pedometer even when you are doing housework or gardening at home.

Note: Before starting any physical activity routine, please check with your healthcare provider first to discuss what is right for you.

For more information, please visit www.heartandstroke.com, www.walkaboutns.ca, or call Julian Morrison, Manager, Health Promotion, Heart and Stroke Foundation, (Nova Scotia office) at (902) 423-7530 ext. 1133; Email: julian.morrison@heartandstroke.ca.

For previous *The Well Teacher* articles,
go to www.nstu.ca

Click on ►► Communications ►► NSTU Publications
►► The Teacher ►► The Well Teacher

[From *The Teacher*, March 2015, Volume 54 Number 5, Page 8 © NSTU 2016]