

Ramblers Walking for Health

Summary

Run by The Ramblers and funded by Sport England, Walking for Health is an England-wide network of schemes that carry out free, regular, short group-walks that are open to all. Mainly targeting older people and those with long-term health conditions, the programme improves and maintains the health and wellbeing of people who may be currently inactive and who need support to remain physically active.

Dr William Bird MBE, CEO Intelligent Health, set up the first Health Walk scheme in 1996:

The benefit of walking in a group is that the social motivation is often the most important factor in getting people active. For some people it is their only contact with the outside. For those who are isolated, then physical activity is a means to an end with meeting others being the primary driver. Walking groups can have a huge impact on ensuring people make movement a part of their daily lives as people have to schedule them in regularly and encourage each other along.

How the service works

Walking for Health comprises of 361 schemes delivering an average of 1,800 walks every week to an audience of 80,000 walkers. Five thousand volunteer walk leaders support the service, and each scheme is led by local organisations such as local authorities, charities, leisure providers and NHS bodies.

Walking for Health is designed to be accessible to people who have done little or no activity before, or who need more support to stay active than they have had in the past. Each walking scheme is tailored to meet the needs of the local area. When there is a need for a new scheme, the Ramblers Walking for Health team is in place with dedicated officers who give the necessary support to establish the scheme.

Each new scheme must meet all 5 specific accreditation criteria, that each walk is:

- regular – consistent walks undertaken on a frequent basis
- short – not longer than 90 minutes and at least one 30-minute walk a week
- easy – accessible to all, particularly people who are currently inactive
- free – no membership or fees, not-for-profit only
- led by trained volunteers – all volunteer leaders must complete our walk leader training

Walking for Health targets older adults and those with long-term health conditions. Those who participate tend to reflect that target demographic, so that:

- 85% of walkers are over 55
- 33.6% of walkers have at least one serious health condition (excluding cancer)
- 4.3% of walkers have been diagnosed with cancer
- 7.3% of new walkers in the past year have been diagnosed with cancer

The programme encourages these participants to raise and then maintain their levels of weekly physical activity as a means of managing some of the symptoms that may be present.

Working Well

Participants report improvement in several measures of wellbeing, such as improving or managing symptoms of long-term health conditions, alleviating social isolation and encouraging social interaction. Examples include:

- reduction of inhaler use
- weight loss
- addressing problems associated with high/low blood pressure
- reducing social isolation
- intervening to address mental health issues such as anxiety

Walking for Health prioritises sustained moderate-level physical activity among its participants. People tend to decrease the amount of activity as they get older, so the programme takes care to focus on encouraging participants to maintain their activity levels.

The evidence gathered to date demonstrates that participants in Walking for Health maintain their levels of weekly physical activity. Moreover, on average, participants were undertaking around 2.5 days of (at least 30 minutes) moderate physical activity at the baseline and final follow-up stages of the survey. More than half of the respondents reported that it was unlikely they would have found a similar scheme in the absence of Walking for Health.

Next steps

Walking for Health continues to grow, develop and welcome new walkers and schemes. The programme is focused on supporting existing schemes to attract new walkers and to transition regular walkers into local Ramblers groups where walks tend to be longer and more challenging.

Further information

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