

WALKING GROUP STARTER KIT



iWALK
sonoma

A program of Health Action Sonoma County
www.iwalksonoma.org

ABOUT IWALK

iWALK is a program of Health Action, which is a partnership of community leaders and organizations committed to improving health and health care for all Sonoma County residents. We are working collaboratively to develop and implement local approaches to promote the health of our community and improve the health care delivery system.

iWALK is our first initiative. With iWALK we hope to . . .

- Inspire people all over the county to begin walking regularly to improve their health.
- Inspire people to join existing walking groups or form new ones with friends, neighbors or co-workers.
- Increase the number of walking groups in Sonoma County.
- Make Sonoma County communities more “walkable”

For more information about Health Action see
www.sonomahealthaction.org

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FORMING A WALKING GROUP

Creating a walking group is easy. All you need are a few people who want to walk together regularly and a plan. This guide will help you get organized, make a plan, stay motivated, and even make your community more “walkable”. Ready to start walking?

Why Form A Walking Group?

Many people enjoy walking alone, but walking with friends, family, neighbors or coworkers can be a great way to stay motivated and make walking fun.

Here are some of the reasons people have given for starting a walking group:

- Tired or bored with walking alone
- Want to spend time with friends
- Want to lose weight or improve health
- Want to share scenic walks with others
- Feel safer walking with others
- Need others to help stay motivated

Benefits of Walking with Others

While walking offers many physical and mental benefits, walking in a group offers additional social benefits.

Walking in a group.

- Is a great opportunity to socialize
- Increases your commitment to a walking routine (people who buddy up for physical activity are more likely to stick to their exercise routine and lose more weight than those who go it alone)
- Can help relieve boredom and depression
- Is safer than walking alone

ORGANIZE A GROUP

Organizing a group may sound difficult, but you don't need a parade of people to get started. Even two people can be enough for a walking group. However many people it takes to motivate you to walk regularly is enough for a walking group.

Start by talking to family members, friends, neighbors and coworkers. If you want to reach out to others, consider posting a notice in your apartment complex, workplace, or at a neighborhood laundromat or market.

Set up a Meeting

Once you have a group of people who are interested in walking, set a time and place to meet to discuss a walking plan. We recommend planning 60 minutes for the first meeting.

If your walking group is small (2 to 3 people), consider having your first meeting on the phone or during a walk around your neighborhood.

If your walking group is large (4 or more people), arrange to meet at someone's house or at a public location, such as a library, park, or your favorite café.

iWALK Tip #1

Let your community know you're walking. Post your walking group and/or walks on the iWALK website.

www.iwalksonoma.org

iWALK Tip #2

Consider setting up a phone tree so each person only has to call one other person. Staying connected with walking group members through phone calls, emails, or newsletters can help keep people motivated.

THE FIRST MEETING

Once you have a meeting day and time set, it's time to make a plan. By creating a plan together that all or most group members agree to, you set the stage for your walking group to reach goals, address any problems that may arise, and have fun.

Member Introductions

If there are members who don't know each other, start the meeting by having everyone introduce themselves. Ask each person to say a few words about why they are interested in the group. This will help people to recognized shared interests and connections. Ask the group members to write down their names and contact information, such as address, phone number, or e-mail. During the meeting, the group can decide how to use this information to let people know about upcoming walks and meetings.

Discussion Questions

Discuss the following questions during the first meeting:

The Walk

- How many times per week will the group walk?
- Where will you walk?
- Where will you meet?
- What time will you meet?
- How long will you walk?

The Group

- How do members prefer to be contacted?
- Who will contact members to remind them of walks and meetings?
- Can anyone invite new members to join the group?
- Will you put a limit on the number of people in the group?
- Will members call one another if someone can't make it, or will the group just walk with whoever shows up?

Additional Questions

- How often will the walking routes change?
- Will the group walk outside if the weather is cold, rainy, or too hot? If not, where will the group walk (indoor mall, large store or building)?
- Will the group allow members to bring their dogs? What kinds of agreements need to be made if members bring dogs?
- Does the group want to allow cell phones and headphones during walks?
- If you have a large group with different fitness levels, will you break into smaller walking groups based on fitness level, goals, availability, or other factors?
- If someone is late for a walk, will the group start without them? Will you circle the block or parking lot until they get there? How will the group deal with this if it happens more than twice?

After the Meeting

Once your group has made a plan, spend the next few weeks or months walking as a group and getting to know each other. Consider having another meeting to talk about individual and group goals and identify ways to support each other in accomplishing them.

iWALK Tip #3

Pass out information about walking safety, dressing for the weather, and warming up and cooling down with the group.

www.iwalksonoma.org

SUPPORTING GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL GOALS

Some groups want to do nothing more than walk, enjoy the fresh air, and have some fun with other walkers. Others want to set individual or group goals that lead to healthy changes for themselves and/or their community. Because setting goals takes planning, we recommend setting up regular meetings to plan for and support these goals.

Discussion Questions

Here are some questions that can help in the planning and supporting of group goals:

Group Decisions

Begin by deciding how the group will make decisions. This is important because doing this can help your group reach its goals. A system for making decisions can help to prevent group conflict.

- Will decisions be made by a leadership team?
- Will the leadership team be asked to talk with other group members before making decisions?
- Will the group make decision based on consensus, majority vote, or another method?

Leadership Team

These are members of your walking group who take the lead in helping the group to stay organized and meet their goals.

Individual and Group Goals

- What are the goals of individual group members?
- What are the goals of the group?

Supporting Goals

- How does the group want to support individual group member goals?
- What steps can be taken to accomplish individual and group goals?
- How will individuals and the group track progress toward accomplishing goals?
- Will your group have regular meetings to discuss goals?

Sample Group Goals

- Create maps of favorite walking routes
- Provide nutrition information for walking group
- Help bring more physical activity programs to the neighborhood
- Improve sidewalks, crosswalks, or lighting in your neighborhood
- Recruit new members
- Choose a name for your walking group
- Design a logo and have T-shirts or hats made
- Develop an email newsletter with motivational tips and favorite walks.

Before Ending the Meeting

If your group chooses to have a leadership team, identify who will be on the team. Decide how often and when you want to meet to discuss the group's progress towards reaching the goals.

THE LEADERSHIP TEAM

As your group begins to walk, you may find that the number of people in your group and ideas for the group will increase. At this point, you may want to consider identifying a few people to take the lead in helping the group to stay organized and meet its goals.

A leadership team usually ranges from two to five people, and its main roles are as follows:

- Convene regular meetings. Meetings should be open to anyone in the walking group and can take place at someone's house or in a public place. Once the group starts to meet regularly, some meetings can take place over the phone.
- Make key decisions for the group. Group leaders make decisions about the group's goals and activities based on input gathered from group members.
- Address group challenges. At times, issues or concerns may emerge in the group. The leadership team can work with the group to address these challenges in order to make walking safe and fun for everyone.
- Help the group reach its goals. Some groups may simply want to walk three days a week. Others may want to promote the group in their community. Still others may want to improve community safety, including fixing sidewalks and crosswalks. Whatever goals are selected, the leadership team can help keep these goals on track through planning and working with group members.

STAYING MOTIVATED

People often find that one of the biggest challenges they face with any fitness program is sticking with the program over time. The benefit of being part of a walking group is that members can support each other and talk about ways to keep each other on track. Here are a few ideas for staying motivated:

- Continue to modify individual and group goals to keep things challenging and exciting.
- Find and share articles or websites on walking, fitness, and health.
- Share success stories and focus on positive changes.
- Recognize group members who have lost weight or improved their health by walking.
- Invite new people to join the group.
- Select a new area to walk or go on walks with other groups in your area.
- Motivate the group by coming up with a group prize when you reach 100 hours of walking. This could be a healthy potluck, a trip to local gardens or the ocean, colored armbands or bracelets, or something as simple as gold stars to stick to their calendars!
- Challenge another walking group to a competition.

iWALK Tip #4

Change the walking environment to keep things fresh.

Visit the iWALK website to find maps for trails and neighborhood walks in your community.

www.iwalksonoma.org

The group can also add new group activities to keep things interesting:

- Organize an all-day or weekend walk to explore a new place, historic spot, or long, scenic trail.
- Organize a family walk at a time when family members can join the group.
- Invite a local speaker to talk about fitness and healthy eating.
- Attend other walking or community events together.
- Get together more often— for breakfast after morning walks or picnics on the weekend.

CREATING A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

Your group may want to do more than just walk. As a group, you can become more involved and set time aside to help improve your community.

- Enter walking events for charity, community parades, or 5K races together.
- Compete with other walking groups for distance walked or money raised for charity.
- Organize a community walk to get others interested in walking. You can partner with a local hospital or other community organization to increase support and participation.
- Focus on improving the health of your community by volunteering or building awareness around issues that are important to the group.
- Organize a “walking audit” of your neighborhood to identify potential community projects (i.e. a park or creek clean-up) or needed infrastructure improvements (i.e. more sidewalks, better lighting, new crosswalks).
- Become involved with local government and speak up for the needs of your community.

iWALK Tip #5

Organize a walking club at your work or organize a walking school bus (before and after school) for kids in your neighborhood.

Visit the iWALK website for starter kits on how to do both:

www.iwalksonoma.org

Grupo SANA (Salud A través de Nutrición y Actividades): A Walking Group Success



Organizing a Group

Grupo SANA started as a group of four women in Kawana Springs, in southeast Santa Rosa, who wanted to develop a walking group and promote physical activity in their community as a means to build community and promote health.

Supporting Group Goals

These four women began to meet regularly and enlisted the help of a community organizer to assist them in developing a plan. They decided to start walking two mornings a week after dropping their children at school. They developed a flyer to invite other people to walk with them, and they met in the school parking lot where they were visible to other parents dropping their children off at school. They also knocked on doors in their neighborhood to meet their neighbors and see who else might be interested in joining their walking group.

It wasn't long before they had up to 25 people on a given day, including mothers pushing strollers! They now walk at the same time, on the same days, in the same place, so that anyone who wants to participate on any given day may do so.

The Leadership Team

Even after launching the walking group, Grupo SANA leaders continue to meet on a weekly basis. They discuss how to keep members motivated, how to respond to barriers that confront the walking group (i.e. rain or cold weather), and the development of long- and short-term goals for the group. They outreach to their neighbors and friends on a regular basis to attract new members to the walking and leadership groups.

Staying Motivated

Grupo SANA leaders help their members stay motivated by developing friendly relationships and providing support and encouragement. When a regular member misses a couple of walks, someone in the group calls or visits them to make sure that they are okay and to see what the group can do to help them begin walking again. One member of the group who is a makeup artist has offered to do makeovers on all members who attend a month of activities- what an incentive! On cold or rainy days, members sometimes go to someone's home to have coffee or atole after the walk. They have also broken into smaller groups based on fitness level and desired speed to keep the walks challenging for those who want to run or power walk and accessible for those who must push strollers or walk more slowly.

Creating Healthy Communities

Grupo SANA leaders found that their members were interested in Zumba classes on the days they don't walk, especially during the winter. They found a Zumba instructor who was willing to teach Zumba classes twice a week in the mornings for a very low cost. They also are working on bringing nutrition information to walking group and Zumba class participants.