

Walking: a common trait of long-lived people

The Situation

Physical inactivity and poor dietary habits have been linked to many chronic diseases and adverse health conditions --as well as to psychosocial problems. In 2013, nearly 80% of adults did not meet minimum physical activity recommendations. Less than 10% of Kansans eat enough fruits/vegetables (CDC , 2015) and chronic disease is responsible for more than 70% of health care costs. Studies show that eating and living the Mediterranean Way can reduce risk of developing certain diseases, including Alzheimer's disease, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and some types of cancer. Other benefits include lower blood pressure and weight loss, and improved eye health by protecting against macular degeneration.

What We Did

Walk Kansas is an 8-week, team-based, health initiative founded on the Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans established by the US Department of Health and Human Services (revised in 2018.) It is offered statewide in the spring by K-State Research and Extension. Participants log physical activity and fruit/vegetable consumption. Teams select a challenge and report regularly through an interactive online learning system. (This online system was also utilized for community walking programs offered outside of Walk Kansas.) Weekly newsletters provide educational content for participants.

In 2020, newsletters highlighted the Mediterranean way of eating, and common traits of the world's longest-lived people, along with tips and information on how to incorporate some of these in their lifestyle. In February, KSRE staff participated in "Med Instead of Meds" professional development activities led by North Carolina University staff.

In an effort to reach a larger audience and to connect with participants in the midst of COVID-19 programming restrictions, agents created videos, offered classes through the Zoom platform, created educational posts for social media and other news outlets. Counties/Districts involved in these efforts include: Central Kansas District, Meadowlark District, Post Rock District, Wildcat District, Wild West District, West Plains District, Southwind District, Dickinson County, Grant County, Harper County, Harvey County, Johnson County, Marion County, Pratt County, Shawnee County, Thomas County.

To reach additional audiences, the Walk with Ease program from the Arthritis Foundation was made available to Kansas extension agents, through a partnership with Kansas Department of Health and Environment. Twenty (20) agents completed online program training and certification with more KSRE staff to be trained in 2021.

Outcomes

In 2020, Walk Kansas participant numbers were lower due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and stay-at-home orders in Kansas. The program continued since it could be adapted to virtual delivery. A total of 1,185 teams with 6,707 people participated. Over the eight weeks, 777,288 total miles were recorded. Fifty-two percent of teams were workplace teams.

The following outcomes were achieved as reported by participants that completed evaluation surveys:

- 93% were motivated to do at least 30 minutes of physical activity 5 or more days per week and met their activity goals; 61% were confident they would continue this amount of physical activity.
- 60% did strengthening exercises at least twice per week, most of the time.
- 89% reported increased awareness of the health benefits from the Mediterranean eating pattern.
- 51% increased fruit and vegetable consumption.
- The following positive changes were reported by participants: 49% increased energy; 44% increased endurance; 29% increased muscle strength; 25% increased flexibility; 13% lower blood pressure; 6% lower cholesterol; 25% decreased weight; 26% improved mood and outlook; 31% better stress management; 32% improved sleep; 16% improved social connections.

In addition, fall walking programs (including Walk With Ease) were offered at locations including: Chisolm Trail District, Harper County, Shawnee County (92 participants), and West Plains District.

Success Stories

Prior to joining my team at work, my A1C was 8.7. My Dr gave me 4 months to bring it down. I went to the Dr on 05/22/20 after participating in this program - my A1C is down to 7.3 and I lost 11 pounds. Changing my eating habits, exercising more, and having moral support did wonders! Thanks! - Thomas County participant

It was the perfect focus for COVID -19. I love to walk anyway, but holding myself accountable was helpful, and a weekly walk with the team an essential break from isolation. I also already ate a Mediterranean diet before enrolling in this event. - Douglas County participant

I want to thank you for providing this program. It helps remind us that our health should be a personal decision we all make. At 72 years of age, I feel that I am able to maintain my weight, flexibility and overall good health because I put the effort into it each day. - Lyon County participant

A Walk with Ease participant, from the West Plains District, indicated she is diabetic, and when she first started the program she could only walk for about 10 minutes and her gait was unstable. By the end of the program she was walking for 20 minutes and her gait improved. Now she enjoys walking and feels confident. She has lost 7 pounds, the tingling in her hands went away, and she has better control of her diabetes. She is going to take the Chronic Disease Self-Management Class offered by KSRE next. The Walk with Ease program helped her see the benefits in walking and taking care of her health. - Submitted by the FCS agent in West Plains District.

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References

bluezones.com

medinsteadofmeds.com

walkkansas.org