



Age well, walk as much as possible

Just before the pandemic, I walked 96 miles (154.5 km) in seven days along the West Highland Way in Scotland, though I was hardly alone in this endeavour. About 250 people start the walk each day, including the amazing group of mostly women that I walked with, indicative of both the attraction of the trail and the popularity of this form of physical activity.

All types of people were walking. There were young people and old people, some fit and some not so obviously so. The walk was exhilarating, and at the same time hard and very long. Much of the great feeling of satisfaction I had at the end of every day was the feeling of achievement at having physically and emotionally pushed my own limits.

This trip made me think about walking in a way that I had never truly done before, and how this simple activity could play such an important role in our daily health and well-being — particularly given the ongoing challenges of COVID-19.

As a geriatrician and researcher focusing on women and aging, I am often asked by women what we can do to age well. There is no fountain of youth, pill to keep you young, or single answer on how to promote social connections. Yet there are common-sense things that can be done to promote well-being and reduce loneliness. Walking is one of them.

What I came to realize during my long trek was that by walking, you not only improve your physical function but also create social connections that reduce loneliness. Walking is a social sport; even if you do it alone, you inevitably meet people along the way.

Steps matter to health. While we often hear about the benefit of taking 10,000 steps a day, a study of older

women by the Women's Health Study found that taking 4,400 steps or more per day was linked to lower mortality compared to women taking about half as many steps per day.

Yet, women walk less than men.

Loneliness is an issue that we have all experienced during COVID-19, but one that has been particularly challenging for older women. Women, make up the majority of Canada's almost seven million older adults. Older women are more likely than older men to live alone and more than 40 per cent of these women report being lonely. The former U.S. Surgeon General has equated the health impact of loneliness to the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

During the pandemic, walking has become an even more attractive option because it is usually done outdoors, reducing the chance of transmitting infection, providing an opportunity to meet with friends more safely. It's also inexpensive. You need a pair of walking shoes and you can start from your front door.

So, what are you waiting for? Reduce your loneliness, improve your well-being — and take the first step.

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