



ON A STROLL

Walkers take the workday in stride

By Ronni Ross
Daily News Staff Writer

Walking for fitness during lunch hours or coffee breaks has become a trend that is growing in popularity by the day. In the Warner Center area of Woodland Hills alone, hundreds of people take to the sidewalks during their workday.

Call them: Worksite Walkers.

With the universal lack of free time that life in the '90s presents, many would-be athletes are finding that the only opportunity they have to exercise is during the course of the workday. And, according to aficionados of the sport, walking is a great way to get fit because it's a low-stress form of exercise, is simple to integrate into almost any lifestyle and is a great way to meet people.

"I was getting a lot of exercise at home with the kids. I'm not used to sitting so much, but now I do because of my job. I noticed I'm accumulating fat. My whole body was getting soft," said Lida Ovanessian, 38, who works for Blue Cross in Woodland Hills and walks every day.

Since she started walking, she said her muscles are getting stronger and she doesn't get as winded as she used to.



Lida Ovanessian, left, and Linda Schulz power walk during a morning break.

Tom Mendoza / Daily News

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"Walking is a natural exercise," she said. Ovanessian walks a one-mile loop around the blocks that surround the Blue Cross facility in Woodland Hills, and also walks in the evening with her husband and children.

"Unfortunately, we don't get a chance to walk much in L.A. We get in our cars," she said.

While taking a brisk walk around the Blue Cross building, Linda Schulz, 46, joked, "We do this so we can eat more doughnuts."

On a more serious note, Schulz, who was walking with co-worker Melissa Tholberg, 40, said, "We do this to get out and get more circulation. We're sitting for eight, nine, 10 hours a day; it's just not healthy."

A growing number of companies are also jumping on the walking bandwagon by offering continuing programs, and by participating in annual events for charities such as the Warner Walk for the March of Dimes.

Last week, Blue Cross kicked off a program titled "Energy Feat," headed by Debbie Gray-Phillips, manager of the insurer's Health Education and Wellness Department. Employees keep track of their mileage, and after accruing certain numbers of miles, receive gifts such as T-shirts and water bottle/hand weights.

"We encourage aerobic walking, which is a brisk pace," explained Gray-Phillips. "We often allude to the 'talk-sing test': You should be able to comfortably talk with someone but probably wouldn't be able to sing. If you can, you probably should push yourself a bit harder."

To maintain enthusiasm about the program, the company will conduct health screenings and hold quarterly seminars on topics such as healthful eating, what types of shoes to wear and stretches for walkers.



Tom Mendoza/Daily News

Most workday walkers change into athletic shoes and socks for their morning ritual.

ten a great response," said Gray-Phillips. One aspect of "Energy Feat" she likes most is that it has a ripple affect. Because mileage is logged on an honor basis, many employees go home at night and walk with their spouses, who then also reap the benefits of exercise.

At Health Net, Cindy Keitel, director of wellness, oversees a similar walking program called "Feet Beat." Participants track their progress on a log sheet and receive one "wellness buck" for each mile or 30 minutes they walk. They can redeem the bucks for walking accessories such as water bottles and sweat pants. Employees also earn bucks for participating in other fitness-related activities sponsored by the company.

Keitel said her company provides "Feet Beat" to its employees — and also to its members — because the American Heart Association has recently added physical inactivity to the list of risk factors for heart disease.

"Far too many people in this country are dying early due to physical inactivity. This is an ideal way to combat that problem," she said.

Since she started walking, Schulz said she no longer has mid-morning slumps, and Tholberg said she has quit drinking coffee.

The two said they walk at least three-quarters of a mile each day, which takes "exactly 15 minutes," according to Tholberg. "That way, we have five minutes to rush back

to our desks."

Ovanessian, Schulz, Tholberg and most of their walking cohorts do so during morning breaks in warmer months.

"It's too hot at lunch," said Schulz. "That's one of the drawbacks. You don't want to go back sweating and smelling."

If popularity is any indication, returning to the office a little sweaty would seem the only drawback to walking. According to a 1990 National Park Service study, 80 million people now walk for physical fitness.

"Walking has really gained in popularity in the past three to four years. Lots of people who used to jog have had damage and have picked up walking," said Blue Cross' Gray-Phillips.

Walking is the activity of choice because it is suitable for everyone. According to Keitel, the American College of Sports Medicine has published a study indicating that individuals tend to continue moderate exercise programs more readily than they do more intensive exercise programs.

"That's important because maintenance of behavior is important," she said. "Initiating a be-

havior is the key to getting people motivated to exercise."

When a firm supports any type of walking program, Keitel and Carolyn Kashian, manager of Work Site Wellness at Health Net, agree that both the employer and its employees benefit.

"(The annual walks) are really beneficial because they get people out exercising and having fun, and then they are encouraged to continue," Keitel said.

Kashian added, "An additional benefit to walking on the work site is it's good for employee morale and it energizes people so it can result in a more productive work force."

Downtown Los Angeles is another area where it's common to see professionals sporting business attire and sneakers while walking among the skyscrapers.

Jennifer Smith, director of wellness at the downtown YMCA, is hired by firms to conduct treks through the city during lunch hours.

"It's really fun. I like it. People can go at their own speed," she said. On a typical day, Smith said there are about 12 people who walk with her, and the majority are women. This, she believes, is because women often don't want to take the time to change clothes and then have to shower before returning to work, as is required with more rigorous workouts.

"Women can do this without having to change clothes. All you need are your sneakers."

Although walking has gained in popularity all over, participants seem particularly fond of Warner Center.

"Warner Center just lends itself to walking," Gray-Phillips said. "It's pretty and there's shade. You have tree-lined streets. We have nice large city blocks; you can walk around all of Blue Cross without having to wait for stoplights."

Besides its healthful, convenient advantages, walking has yet another benefit: camaraderie.

"It's a good way for people who have similar likes to get to know

Going the distance on local routes

Here are a few suggested routes and miles for Warner Center walkers:

- Warner Ranch Park, between Owensmouth and Topanga Canyon Boulevard: one-half mile around park.
- Around Blue Cross build-

ing, between Canoga and Owensmouth, Oxnard to Erwin Street: one mile.

■ Oxnard Street to Burbank Boulevard: about one-half mile.

■ Canoga to De Soto avenues: about one-half mile.