

**“Walking: Good for Your Body and Your Mind”
Senior Living Institute of New Jersey**

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Design for Generations, LLC
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People are accustomed to walking throughout their lives so the ability of people to walk in a safe, secure environment should be a part of everyone's life as they age. Providing access to walking paths, nature trails and neighborhood sidewalks is essential in maintaining one's independence. Walking can improve muscle tone, strength and coordination. Current research validates these beliefs:

- ❖ *“Exercise is the single most important anti-aging measure anyone can follow regardless of age.” (The Mayo Clinic Health Letter)*
- ❖ *“Walking stimulates the brain to release endorphins, the body's natural opiates, which can make you feel better about life right away.” (Cleveland Clinic Health Extra, 2004)*
- ❖ *The health benefits of walking include “stress reduction and a reduction in the risk of developing heart disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, stroke and breast or colon cancer.” (Cleveland Clinic Health Extra, 2004)*
- ❖ *“Deterioration in muscle strength, flexibility and endurance is not a natural part of aging, but a lack of regular exercise brought on by inactivity or a fear of falling is.” (American Academy of Otolaryngology, 2007)*
- ❖ *“There is now scientific evidence that providing access to places for physical activity increases the level of physical activity in a community” (Center for Disease Control)*
- ❖ *“Grass and trees in outdoor spaces were shown to increase the use and social activity in outdoor spaces. Trees and grass not only bring neighbors together but also support social interaction among them” (William Sullivan, Frances Kuo and Stephen DePooter, 2004)*

Meadow Lakes launches a walking program

by Stacey Judge

With 103 landscaped acres, Meadow Lakes was made for walking—literally. Opened in 1965, the continuing care retirement community in suburban Hightstown, New Jersey, was deliberately designed to make walking an integral part of each resident's daily routine. Numerous outdoor trails anticipated that people would hike, walk and enjoy picnics in the woods. And two of three lakes seemed ideal for boating and fishing.

In addition, plenty of indoor walking was expected. Meadow Lakes' 47 residential buildings—all essentially on one floor—connect to the campus's core through interior walkways. The distance from the easternmost to westernmost interior points is a half-mile.

But, as time passed, residents had grown more content to enjoy Meadow Lakes from behind glass windows. And motorized carts were becoming all too prevalent. Meant for use during illness or injury, these *wheels* proved so convenient that people capable of walking were continuing to use them long after they were necessary.

Things began to change in the late 1990s, when Meadow Lakes adopted a wellness model and built a fitness center and indoor pool. About 60% of residents now participate in the fitness program at least once a week. Managed by the Hightstown-East Windsor YMCA, the program provides residents with a range of activities, which tend to focus on strength and balance training.

When assessed, Meadow Lakes residents showed improvements in static balance, lower body strength and lower body flexibility. But their cardiovascular fitness lagged, recording just a 6% increase since the fitness center opened.

Walking for health

Fitness staff recognized the need to stress the benefits of walking as part of a structured exercise regimen, as well as an activity of daily living. They believed that even people who did not participate in fitness center activities might be motivated to incorporate more walking into their daily routines and realize health benefits. The results of a one-month walking pilot program in October 2002 encouraged the community to apply for and win a \$28,000 grant from the New Jersey-based Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF). With the RWJF grant, Meadow Lakes launched a walking program for residents in April 2003.

Managed by the Hightstown-East Windsor YMCA, the walking program incorporates health education; the use of pedometers and log books to track mileage; development of outdoor walking paths; *giveaway* incentives; progress tracking outcomes; and labeling of trails and roads with distance markers.

As residents start striding indoors and out, they receive pedometers from fitness staff. They also get written and verbal instructions on how to use their pedometers, plus a book about walking and a log book for tracking mileage. An initial assessment establishes an individual's baseline fitness. And, for the program's first 12 months, quarterly assessments are helping to measure the program's success and motivate participants.

Designing the great outdoors

With a major makeover of its current walking trails and the creation of several new ones, Meadow Lakes hopes to lure many more residents back to the pleasure of walking outdoors. Most notable among these new pathways is a



planned trail that takes walkers around one of the community's lakes. Working with Design for Generations, a New Jersey landscape architect and design firm specializing in environments for older adults, Meadow Lakes will create strategic areas for bird watching, places to stop and enjoy views of natural areas, and places just to sit and rest.

Safety is the first and foremost consideration. That means level pathways with appropriate slopes and no encroaching vegetation or other tripping hazards. The pathways also must accommodate wheelchairs and walkers as much as possible. In addition, resting areas with benches, signage pointing to areas of interest, mileage markers, and courses of varying distance will keep residents interested and motivated.

A model program?

Meadow Lakes hopes its walking program will provide a prototype for other affiliated communities. If successful, the program will be used as a model for other communities operated by Princeton-based Presbyterian Homes & Services, provided sufficient funding sources are available. ▼

Stacey Judge, wellness director of Meadow Lakes, oversees the walking program there. She is also wellness director for the Western Monmouth County YMCAs. A 15-year veteran of the fitness industry, Stacey has focused on working with a special needs population. She can be reached at 609-448-4100.