

By **CHLOE LAMBERT**

**W**HAT nicer way could there be to work off the excesses of Christmas than a walk? Research shows the festive break is the most popular time for rambling.

But while many of us think walking is 'cheating', a growing body of evidence suggests that it's actually one of the best forms of exercise for both body and brain. So if you're looking for a New Year's resolution you can stick to, here the experts reveal what walking could do for you...

### ■ WE WEREN'T BORN TO RUN

THE human ability to walk has been a crucial part of our success as a species. Scientists think part of the reason walking is so good for us is that our bodies have evolved to move in this way.

'Our ancestors weren't running around. They were walking, an estimated 15 miles a day when they were hunter gatherers,' says Michael Depledge, professor of environment and human health at the University of Essex.

Physiotherapist Sammy Margo adds: 'Bodies hate jolty, aggressive movement as you get with jogging. Walking allows your heart to pump in a rhythmical way, meaning your circulation is at its most efficient.'

Studies have shown that men who walk more than one and a half miles a day reduce their risk of heart disease by half.

Meanwhile, in 2008 researchers at Canterbury Christ Church University found that men with hypertension saw their blood pressure reduced for four hours after just a 30 minute walk.

Margo adds that walking has an almost zero injury rate, compared with running, which causes injuries in up to 80 per cent of people.

'That's because when you walk you're carrying three to four times your body weight; with running it's six to eight times.'

### ■ IT BEATS BACK PAIN

LOWER back pain is often put down to the fact we were meant to be on all fours. But osteopath Clive Lathey says the opposite is true. 'If you look at the pelvis, the sacroiliac joint in the lower back, and the S-shaped curve of the spine, they are designed for shock-absorbing vertical force.'

'We're well adapted to walking. What we're not adapted to is spending lots of time sitting down in cars and at computers — that tightens and weakens the muscles in the back.' Sammy Margo agrees: 'Walking nourishes and "juices" the discs and joints of the back.'

### ■ IT'S GREAT FOR YOUR BEHIND...

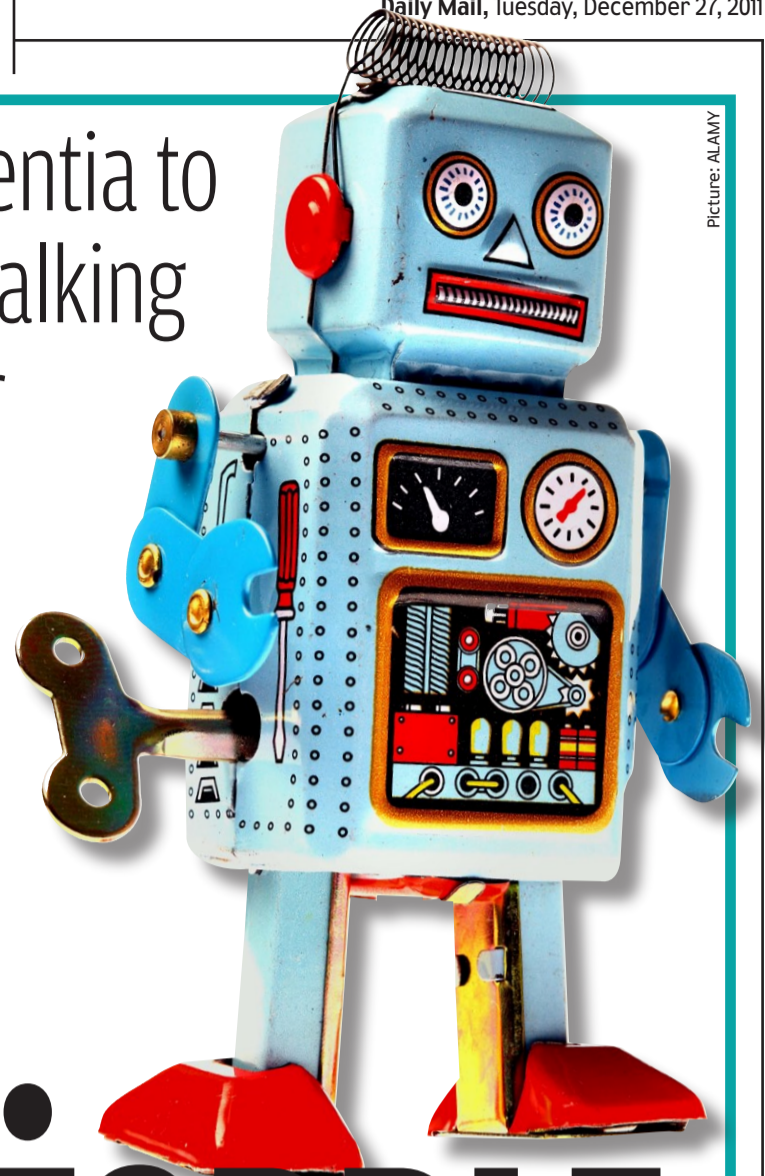
'WALKING is incredible for your bottom, as long as you do it with a long stride,' says fitness expert Lucy Wyndham-Read. 'You can test this by standing up and taking a big step back — you'll feel all the muscles in the bottom and backs of the legs are being used. That's what happens when you're walking. Now stand up and lift one leg up as if you're jogging — you'll notice it's not quite the same.'

### ■ ... AND YOUR BRAIN

A U.S. study last year showed a daily stroll may increase the size of your brain. University of Illinois researchers studied 120 volunteers aged 50 to 80 over a year.

From staving off dementia to toning your behind, walking is the runaway winner

**DON'T GO FOR A JOG... TAKE A TODDLE**



Picture: ALAMY

Half were assigned to start walking 40 minutes a day, three times a week, while the others were told to do stretching and toning exercises.

After 12 months, brain scans showed the walking group had an average 2 per cent growth in the hippocampus — the brain's memory centre. The stretching group's hippocampuses shrank 1 per cent.

Arthur Kramer, professor of psychology and neuroscience and co-author of the study, believes cardiovascular activity such as walking boosts blood flow to the brain, triggering new neurons to grow, giving the brain a 'cushion' that protects from dementia.

Commenting on the findings, Dr Lynn Millar, of the American College Of Sports Medicine, says walking is good for the brain because it makes it multitask. 'When we walk we integrate visual input, auditory input and input coming from joints and muscles.'

### ■ IT WILL CHEER YOU UP

LIKE all exercise, walking releases the 'feel-good' hormones endorphins, serotonin and dopamine — but its gentle pace is thought to be one of the best for depression.

'Short bouts of moderate exercise make people feel more activated and positive than during

vigorous exercise, which is stressful,' says Adrian Taylor, professor of exercise and health psychology at the University of Exeter.

'Walking gets you away from stresses of work or home,' adds Ken Fox, professor of exercise and health sciences at Bristol University.

Professor Depledge agrees that the pace of walking, as opposed to running, allows the brain to fully take in your surroundings, which seems to boost mental wellbeing.

'We're not sure why, but walking outdoors is better for you than doing the same amount of walking around a shopping centre. Being in contact with nature seems to provide mental restoration — we think that things you experience through the senses such as the eyes and the nose have an effect on the brain.'

### ■ WALK BEFORE, NOT AFTER, A HEAVY MEAL

MANY like to 'walk off' a heavy meal — but studies show a stroll before eating is even better because it reduces damage done by the high-fat foods you're about to eat.

Glasgow University research found a 90-minute walk before dinner lowered fat levels in the blood by 25 per cent both before and after the meal and improved the function of the inner walls of

blood vessels, meaning they were better defended from the build-up of harmful fatty deposits.

The researchers suggested that exercise improves the way the body metabolises food. 'If you are going to overeat at lunchtime or dinner, it would be worth considering going for a good long walk first as this at least can undo some of the damage,' says Professor Peter Weissberg of the British Heart Foundation, which was involved with the research.

Walking before a meal may also mean you're less likely to overeat, suggests recent research from the University of Campinas, Brazil.

It found a stroll before eating helps restore the sensitivity of brain cells involved in the control of fullness.

### ■ COUNT YOUR STEPS

GOVERNMENT guidelines recommend walking 10,000 steps a day — five miles — to maintain a healthy heart and keep your weight in check. The average Briton clocks up 5,000 to 7,500 steps a day without realising.

'If you walk 20 minutes to work in the morning, or to the station, that's 5,000 already,' says Lucy Wyndham-Read. 'Do the same at night and you've hit your target.'

### ■ MYTH OF 'NO PAIN NO GAIN'

'BRISK walking can burn just as many calories as jogging,' says Lucy Wyndham-Read. She adds that to burn fat you should walk at 140 steps per minute. Twenty minutes will burn 180 to 220 calories. You can make your walk even more of a workout by carrying a backpack with a bottle of water inside, or by walking on sand or through long grass, she says.

If you're not a brisk walker, try a longer hike. 'If you're not walking at speed, after 45 minutes your body starts to use fat cells for extra fuel,' adds Ms Wyndham-Read.

### ■ YES, IT CAN INDUCE LABOUR

A GENTLE stroll might help bring on labour, says Patrick O'Brien, spokesman for the Royal College Of Obstetricians And Gynaecologists. 'The more the weight of the baby presses down on the cervix, the more the woman releases her own oxytocin hormones which help to trigger and regulate your contractions,' he says. Being upright also encourages a baby to move down into the pelvis — the correct position for labour.

## The Inside Track Erectile dysfunction

WHILE pelvic floor exercises were developed for incontinence problems, they may also help men with premature ejaculation and erectile dysfunction by strengthening muscles around the penis, says Wendy Hurn, urology nurse consultant at Bristol Royal Infirmary.

To identify the muscles that need to be exercised, sit relaxed and tighten the ring of muscle around the back passage as if you are trying to control wind. You should be able to feel the muscle move. Then imagine you are passing

urine, trying to stop the flow mid-stream, then restarting it. (Do not try to stop while actually peeing; this can cause bladder problems.) With the correct technique you feel a dip at the base of your penis and the scrotum move up slightly.

Sit, stand or lie with your knees slightly apart. Slowly tighten and pull up the pelvic floor muscles as hard as you can for as long as you can. Rest for four seconds then repeat. Build up until you can do ten slow contractions at a time.

ANNA HODGEKISS

OUT OF ORDER!

## VITAMIN MATHS

The foods that add up to your recommended daily allowance



An 80g serving of boiled curly kale (120mg)

+



200ml strawberry milkshake (270mg)

+



100g sardines in tomato sauce (410mg)

=

RDA of 800mg calcium

CALCIUM helps form the strong structural matrix of bones and teeth. Insufficient calcium over a lifetime can contribute to osteoporosis (brittle bone disease). Calcium

is also needed for muscle contraction. Other good sources include all dairy products, almonds and Brazil nuts.

ANGELA DOWDEN