

## **On your marks, get set...Walk Kansas begins Mar. 27**

MANHATTAN, Kan. – For the past 20 years, thousands of people enrolled in the Walk Kansas program have walked, biked, swam, and moved their bodies in many other ways to improve their physical fitness.

That's all good and well, said program coordinator Sharolyn Jackson, but the benefits of the popular program go well beyond that.

“What we know is that what is good for the heart is also good for the brain,” Jackson said. “So this year, we are focusing on how physical activity, nutrition, and other lifestyle practices improve our brain function.”

Walk Kansas will run March 27 through May 21, encouraging teams of six to sign up together and get moving. Every 15 minutes of activity counts for one mile of distance, and teams track their mileage virtually as they move across pre-determined routes in or across Kansas. More than 6,000 people participated in Walk Kansas last year.

“Any kind of activity counts so long as you're working at a moderate intensity where you can barely carry on a conversation, but you can't sing,” said Jackson, who is a family and consumer sciences specialist in K-State Research and Extension's northeast area office.

“For a lot of people, walking is something they can do. For others, it might be riding a bike, rowing, swimming or another water exercise, strength training, playing tennis or pickleball and other team sports, or even rolling, if you're in a wheelchair. We call it Walk Kansas, but in reality, anything counts as long as you're working at a moderate or vigorous intensity level.”

Participants can do the activities on their own or with an exercise buddy or team member.

Registration for Walk Kansas is available online. The cost is \$10 per person; a program t-shirt can be purchased separately. Team registrations require a captain and up to five additional members, which can live anywhere in or out of the state or country. If you would rather participate solo, individuals can sign up to complete their own challenge.

More information is also available at local extension offices in Kansas. Registration will open on March 1 or shortly after.

“We have some participants who have done this every year since the program started in 2001,” Jackson said. “People have told me they feel like spring is here when Walk Kansas kicks off.”

This year's program provides three team challenges:

- Challenge 1 - “8 Wonders of Kansas” trail, requires each person to get at least 2 ½ hours of moderate activity/week and challenges the team to travel 480 miles.
- Challenge 2 – “Cross Country Trail” requiring 4 hours of activity/week from each person, with the team traveling 768 miles.
- Challenge 3 – “Little Balkans to Nicodemus Trail” that will require 6 hours of activity from each team member/week, challenging the team to go 1152 miles.

The solo challenge trail begins in Manhattan at Kansas State University and explores points of interest on a trail to Wichita State University.

All participants will receive a weekly online newsletter with helpful information on physical activity, improving lifestyle habits, nutrition, and healthful recipes. This year, Jackson said, the

nutrition focus is on the MIND diet, which is a combination of what is widely known as the Mediterranean and DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) diets.

The Mediterranean diet, she added, is rich in fruits and vegetables, nuts, healthy fats, and fiber; the DASH diet emphasizes lower-sodium eating.

“There are a lot of things we can do to help our mind,” Jackson said. “Physical activity on its own is something that helps us retain our brain function as we age and helps delay the onset of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease. It can help manage stress, which is hard on our mind, as well.”

“There are some foods that are particularly helpful to the brain. One of those is blueberries. We are going to look at why blueberries are so good for the mind. That’s one of the fruits that is recommended. And eating dark leafy green vegetables every day.”

Walk Kansas also promotes getting adequate sleep, drinking water, and strengthening exercises.

“It is best to take things one step at a time. Small changes lead to better habits, and then to long-term behavior change,” Jackson said.

“The long-term benefits of a healthful lifestyle are huge. We encourage people to do things they enjoy and that is going to motivate them to be more active, and one of the benefits they will notice immediately is how they feel better.”

Contact your local River Valley District Extension Office in Belleville (785-527-5084), Clay Center (785-632-5335), Concordia (785-243-8185), or Washington (785-325-2121) for more information about Walk Kansas.