



## Time for Social Prescribing to Heart Foundation Walking

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Social prescribing is defined as 'connecting individuals to community services for health and wellbeing'. In 2020, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and the Consumers Health Forum of Australia released a roundtable report on social prescribing to improve chronic disease outcomes and overall health [1]. Social prescribing in Australia is growing, and there are calls for it to become embedded in routine care.

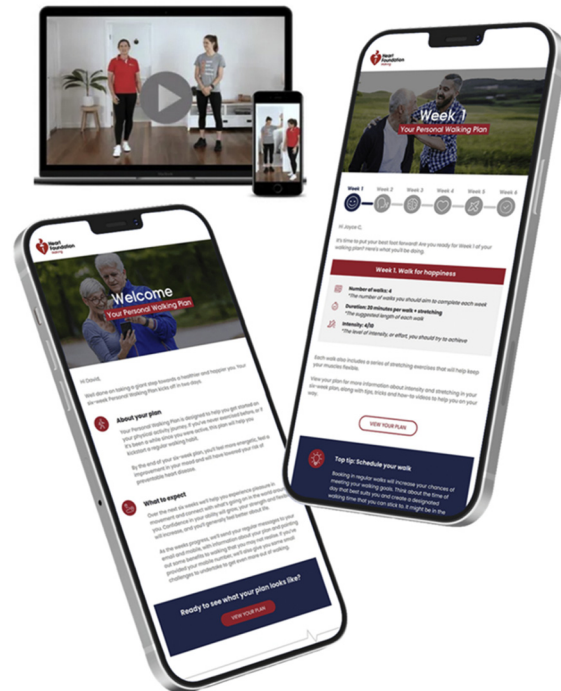
Physical activity, such as walking, can lower the risk of heart disease, stroke and diabetes by 30 to 40% [2]. Adults who engage in leisure time aerobic and muscle strengthening activities at guideline-recommended levels can reduce all-cause mortality by 40% [3]. However, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, only 15% of Australian adults are achieving the Australian physical activity and exercise guidelines of 150 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity and two strength training sessions per week.

Australian preventive health strategies such as the *National Preventive Health Strategy 2021–2030* and the *National Obesity Strategy 2022 – 2032* both outline the need for physical activity initiatives and health professional training on social prescribing to support more Australians to become active every day. One established option for health professional social prescribing is Heart Foundation Walking.

The Heart Foundation provides free access to both group and individualised walking programs. A network of engaged volunteers run over 1,100 Heart Foundation Walking groups across Australia, in all states and territories. Groups are available in regional and remote areas, they engage those with very low incomes, and most participants have one or more chronic diseases or disease risk factors [4].

Personal Walking Plans, a free 6-week plan and digital journey, were introduced in March 2021. The initiative was designed for those who prefer to walk on their own or in their own way. Over 115,000 Australians have already signed up. Designed to reach guideline-recommended physical activity levels by week six, the tailored plans encourage progressive increases in weekly walking and include exercise videos to guide people to complete two strength-based exercise programs each week.

To find out more, or to find your local walking group, visit Heart Foundation Walking at [walking.heartfoundation.org.au](http://walking.heartfoundation.org.au)



## References

- [1] Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and Consumers Health Forum of Australia. Social prescribing roundtable November 2019. 2020. [www.racgp.org.au/advocacy/advocacy-resources/social-prescribing-report-and-recommendations](http://www.racgp.org.au/advocacy/advocacy-resources/social-prescribing-report-and-recommendations).
- [2] Department of Health and Social Care. Physical activity guidelines: UK Chief Medical Officers' report. 2020. [www.gov.uk/government/publications/physical-activity-guidelines-uk-chief-medical-officers-report](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/physical-activity-guidelines-uk-chief-medical-officers-report).
- [3] Zhao M, Veeranki SP, Magnussen CG, Xi B. Recommended physical activity and all cause and cause specific mortality in US adults: prospective cohort study. *BMJ*. 2020;370:m2031. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2031>.
- [4] Ball K, Abbott G, Wilson M, Chisholm M, Sahlqvist S. How to get a nation walking: reach, retention, participant characteristics and program implications of Heart Foundation Walking, a nationwide Australian community-based walking program. *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act*. 2017;14:161. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-017-0617-5>.