Triumphs of the Treadmill
Talking the Talk and Walking the Walk

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Recently a friend shared with me her doctor’s orders regarding exercise. It went like this: Never sit when you can stand. Never stand when you can walk. And never walk when you can jog. At least, it was something like that, and it prompted me to respond, tongue-in-cheek, "What you need is a new doctor." "I can’t change right now," she said. "He's my husband." Actually, it’s not bad advice that her doctor-husband had given her, for – like it or not – exercise is one of life’s leading elixirs. The proof is in the prodigious research.

Out of Harvard and its Alumni Health Study comes this information: Men who had chosen a passive life-style, and whose health in adulthood was only fair or poor, perked up and did just fine when persuaded to get going on an exercise program. And note this: Those men who had been college athletes deteriorated in adulthood if they gave up their rowing with the crew, jousting on the tennis courts, or shooting hoops. That’s significant! But exercise is more than solid muscles and a resting heart rate of 60. Consider the following.

A group of intrepid Finnish epidemiologists studied 16,000 twins, beginning way back in 1975. Over 20 years, 1,253 of them died. Those who exercised consistently lived on with a risk of death 43 percent less than their armchair siblings. And note – these were twins – same sex, and same genetic pool. Our thanks to the Helsinki researchers who cleared that up for us.

But like we said, exercise is more than solid muscles and an athlete’s resting heart rate. Take, for example, depression – did you know that you can, like as not, exercise it away? Not always, to be sure, but often. And sky-high blood pressure – watch it take a dive in response to activity. And cholesterol – down it goes when we "run instead of walk, walk instead of stand, stand instead of sit."

Oh yes, and don’t forget the extra pounds that you wanted to delete. Away they go. If your appetite is below par, exercise will enrich it. If excessive, activity will moderate it. Exercise goes just fine in both directions. There’s more, but perhaps that’s enough for now.

Most anyone of most any age can feel better, be better, and do better with exercise. Caution though – be sure that your physician approves and advises. Even salubrious exercise can have a down side. No need to risk a bad event.