- Walking / Exercise / Mind and body / Weight loss

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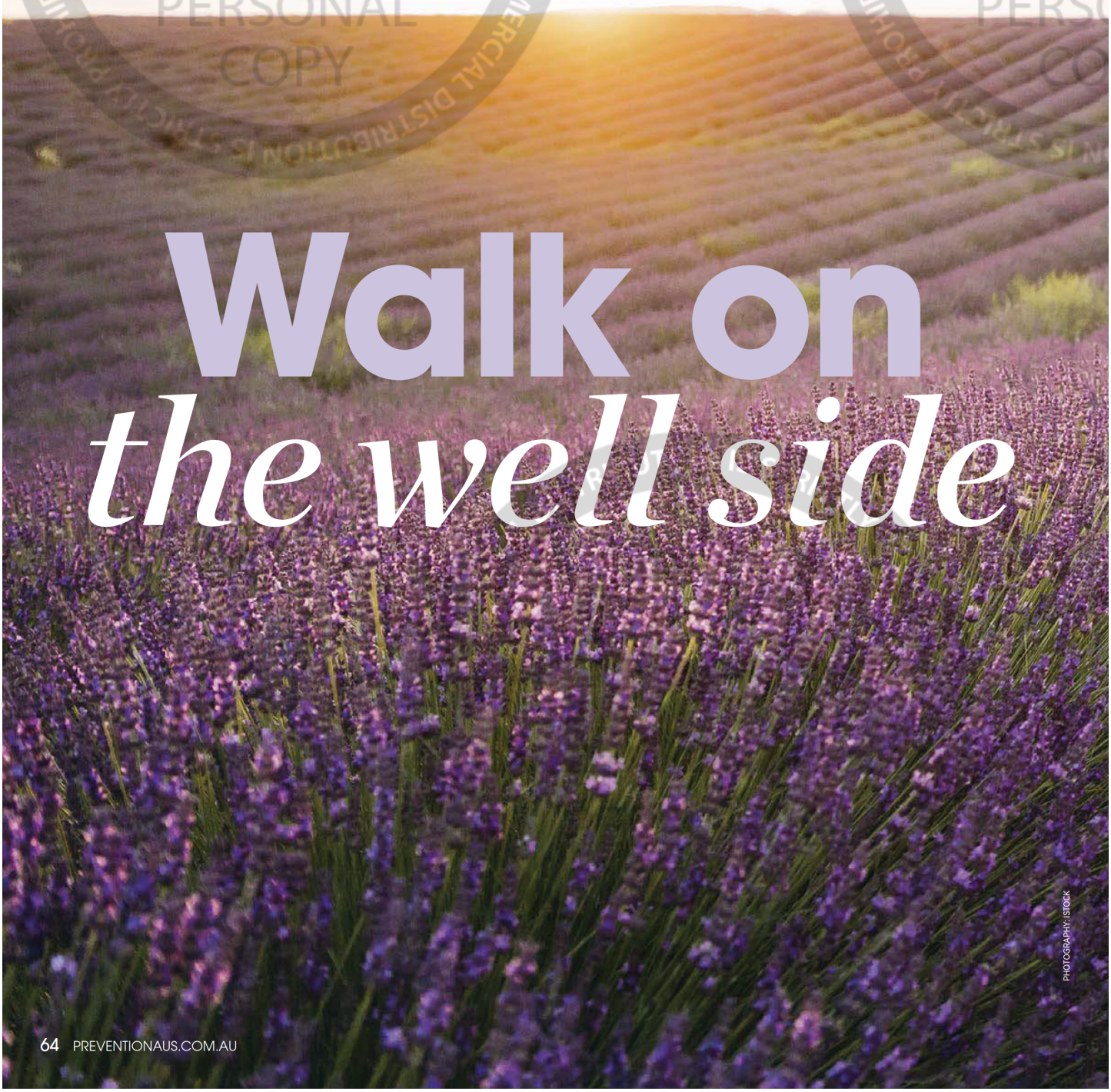
Wouldn't it be great if you could improve your fitness, boost your mindset *and* lose weight at the same time? Oh, wait... you can! All you need to do is lace up your walking shoes.

Walk on the well side



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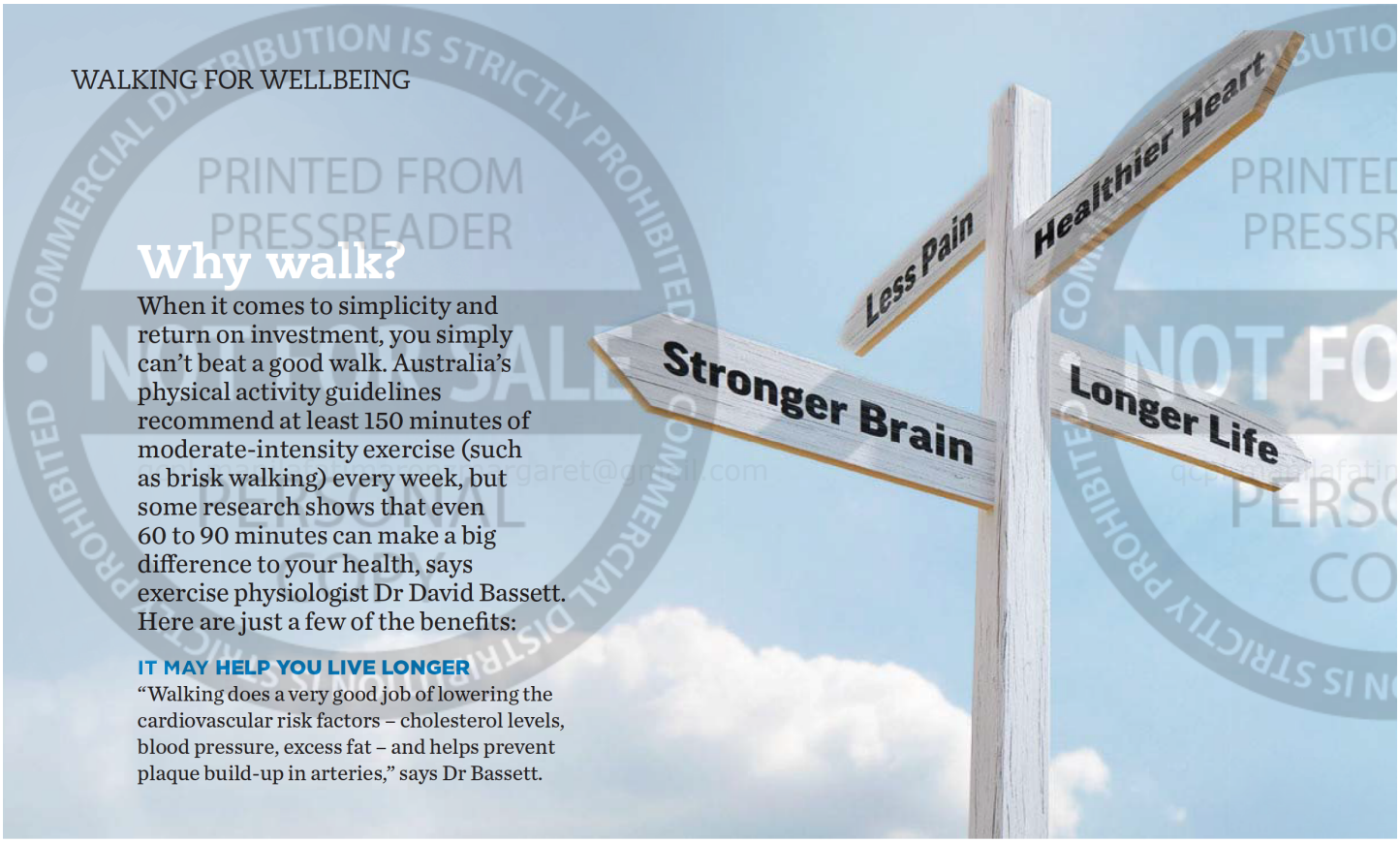

Why walk?

When it comes to simplicity and return on investment, you simply can't beat a good walk. Australia's physical activity guidelines recommend at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity exercise (such as brisk walking) every week, but some research shows that even 60 to 90 minutes can make a big difference to your health, says exercise physiologist Dr David Bassett. Here are just a few of the benefits:

IT MAY HELP YOU LIVE LONGER

"Walking does a very good job of lowering the cardiovascular risk factors – cholesterol levels, blood pressure, excess fat – and helps prevent plaque build-up in arteries," says Dr Bassett.



GET JOY FROM YOUR STROLL

If you really want walking to become part of your regular routine, you need to make it enjoyable. "I know very few people who say, 'Boy, I really hate this activity, but I'm going to do it because I know it's healthy for me,'" says Dr Bassett. The key is to reframe your thinking, explains running coach Julie Wallock. "It's not 'How do I fit this exercise in?' but instead, 'I'm thankful I get to do this,'" she says. Here's how to get into that mindset:

LOOK FOR HAPPINESS

Think of things that literally represent happiness (such as hearts, smiley faces or flowers) and see how many you can spot as you walk. Trainer Betsy Magato likes to search for hearts in footpath cracks. "When you have that joyful feeling, you want to go back and do it again," she says. "It's a really positive loop you get yourself in."

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Plus, he notes, walking can improve insulin resistance. Indeed, one study found that doing moderate-intensity stair walking for as little as three minutes can help lower glucose and insulin concentrations.

IT KEEPS YOUR BRAIN SHARP

"Walking has positive effects on the brain, such as increasing brain blood flow, so that's important in terms of the prevention of Alzheimer's and other memory loss," says Dr Bassett. "It also helps with decision-making." Research even shows that your attention and focus may improve after a quick stroll, he adds.

IT SUPPORTS YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM

"Walking does a great job of boosting all the different immune cells in the body that help fight off infection," Dr Bassett says.

CRAFT THE PERFECT PLAYLIST

Start by making a 'value playlist' for musical motivation, suggests neuropsychologist Dr Judy Ho, author of *Stop Self-Sabotage*. "Values are different from goals in that they're not checked off of a list, but rather they represent how you want to live your life," she says. "Ideally, your goals should link to your values for maximum motivation. Some examples of values include integrity, adventure and knowledge. I like to pick songs I think represent my top values." Listen to your playlist while you're cleaning, walking or doing whatever, just to remind yourself of your main values. "It'll keep you engaged and remind you why you're committing to these goals," adds Dr Ho.

SCOUT OUT SPECIAL LOCATIONS

Maybe the suburb or region next to yours has a particularly beautiful open space or reserve. Or perhaps there's a national park or bush trail that you'd like to walk through. Set aside one day a week for a meander somewhere new and plan your destination ahead of time so you'll have something to look forward to on the other days.



FIND A WALKING BUDDY

While walking solo can help you clear your head, bringing a friend along provides a different way to separate from daily worries. Here's how:

RECRUIT RIGHT

To find people to walk with you, it's as easy as asking them. But think about the types of people you want to spend quality time with – you aren't going to want to stroll with those who get on your nerves. Aim for at least two other people committing before you get started – that way, you still have a walking buddy if one can't show up.

KEEP IT FUN

"If you have a group that's interested in reading, you could always do a book club: Read a book and then discuss it while you're walking," says walking coach Michele Stanten. "If you have people who don't know each other, do little icebreakers as you're walking: Have people share stories and ask silly questions." It'll give everyone the chance to get to know each other, put their guard down and build new, meaningful relationships – more reason to keep on stepping! ►

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Upgrade your walk with other exercises

"It's important to look at walking not as your sole form of activity, but as an important foundational exercise," says Dr Bassett. He suggests adding swimming, hiking with walking poles, resistance training, intense gardening or chores to build upper-body muscles. It's not about having a six-pack – maintaining muscle mass across your body can enhance balance, improve sleep quality and reduce the risk of falls, says fitness trainer Jessica Mazzucco. She shares a few of her favourite muscle-strengthening moves below:

INCLINE PUSH-UP

For chest, triceps, shoulders

Get in a push-up position with palms on a bench, a stair, or another raised surface. Your body should be in a straight incline. Do a push-up by bending your elbows and lowering your chest to the surface, and then push up. Do 15 reps, then rest for one minute. Complete three sets.

ARM CIRCLES

For shoulders, triceps, biceps

Stand straight with feet shoulder-width apart. Raise your arms so they're parallel to the ground, and then move them in small forward circles for one minute. Complete the same move in the other direction for one minute. Repeat for up to six minutes in total.

FOREARM PLANK

For abdominals, biceps

Start in a push-up position with your back straight, arms directly aligned under shoulders. Drop down to your forearms so hands are flat on the floor and elbows form a 90-degree angle. Keep your weight balanced throughout. Hold for 30 seconds to one minute. Do two to three reps.

SUPERMAN

For upper back, lower back, glutes, hamstrings, abdominals

Lie flat on your stomach with your arms outstretched straight in front of you. Raise your arms and legs up off the floor as high as possible. Hold this position for 10 seconds, and then gently lower to the ground. Repeat for a total of one minute.



HOW WALKING BOOSTS WEIGHT LOSS

You don't need to run marathons or live at the gym to shed kilos – walking can be your secret weight-loss weapon. Just keep these pointers in mind.

BURNING KJS IS THE KEY

High-intensity interval training (HIIT) is good, but it can be intimidating and it's not necessary for weight loss. "Certainly if you go at a higher intensity and walk faster or up a hill or carry a backpack, those things would result in greater kilojoule burn," says Dr Bassett. "But you also have the option to just walk longer – that would also increase the number of kJs you use up."



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WALKING CAN REDUCE FAT
The more you walk, the more fat you'll burn. "Walking doesn't do a terribly good job of building muscle, but, as you become more trained, the body shifts to burning more fat as opposed to carbohydrates," Dr Bassett explains. That means that when you develop a regular exercise routine, your body will burn more fat than it used to. The best part? Dr Bassett says that, with just two weeks of regular walks, your body's metabolism will start to shift.

CONSIDER YOUR WHOLE SELF
"The mind-body connection is something that's really well established at this point," says Dr Ho. If you don't take care of your mental health, your physical health is more likely to suffer, but the opposite is also true. "We know that exercise reduces mild to moderate depression quite a bit, so it's very helpful for that," says Dr Bassett. He says it can also increase your energy and enthusiasm. This means that, by walking more, you might feel better emotionally and, as a result, sleep better and be less likely to crave highly processed foods – both of which can help you drop excess kilos.

STICK WITH IT
Once you reach your goal weight, don't stash away your workout gear in a drawer. Continuing to walk at least 150 minutes a week will make it easier to keep weight off, Dr Bassett says. The exercise might keep you in shape as well as spur you to adhere to other healthy habits.



FUEL YOUR WALK

Walking is a powerful way to take care of your body physically, but you also need to nourish it by eating healthy foods. Not sure where to start? Dietitian Marisa Moore shares a few ideas.

INCLUDE PROTEIN, COMPLEX CARBS AND HEALTHY FATS
"If you're tired, it could be that you don't have enough carbs in your system," says Marisa. "After your walk, it's important to get carbs and protein to support muscle synthesis." An apple with nut butter makes a great snack, while salmon, broccoli and brown rice hit the spot for a meal.

PLAN AHEAD
Adding walks to your busy schedule can make it even harder to find time for a home-cooked meal. That's where a bit of meal prepping comes in. Make larger dinners so you'll have leftovers, or fill jars with yoghurt, fruit and nuts to grab in the morning on the way out.

CHANGE YOUR THINKING
Remember that you're not 'earning' food when you exercise. For instance, a 30-minute walk shouldn't equal an ice-cream in your mind. "You're not running to burn off any specific type of food," Marisa says. Instead, keep motivated by improving your body.

DRINK ENOUGH WATER
Hydration is vital, especially if you've recently upped your exercise. "Try adding lime or mint to your water to keep it interesting," she suggests. P