

Walking is often called the perfect exercise. It's remarkable something so simple – putting

one foot in front of the other – can be so restorative and invigorating. But the medical evidence is compelling. Taking regular brisk walks helps you stay healthy, live longer and boosts your self-esteem and mood.

Television presenter and Ramblers president Julia Bradbury is the modern face of walking. Her passion started as a six-year-old in the Peak District with her father: 'I love the Peak District and, over the years, walking with Dad through the valleys and limestone hills, I developed a comfortable outdoor spirit.'

Bradbury's television series *Wainwright Walks* and *Railway Walks* (juliabradbury.com) have helped inspire a renewed interest in country walking. A Ramblers survey revealed 77 per cent of UK adults – about 38 million people – walk for pleasure at least once a month. Of these, 62 per cent cover more than two miles a time.

With so many demands on our time, it can be hard to make space for a worthwhile walk. But if you can manage to fit one in, the payback can be enormous – an all-round lift for the mind, body and soul.

Refresh your mind

There's something about the regular roll and rhythm of walking that frees the mind and sparks creative connections, so it's not surprising many writers have used walking to stimulate creativity. 'Walk and be happy, walk and be healthy,' said



'Dickens was a phenomenal walker, and would dream up new novels while on 20-mile treks'

Charles Dickens. A phenomenal walker, in his diaries he recorded how, during 20-mile treks, he would come up with the plots for his novels.

Whether you're dreaming up your own bestseller, or figuring out a challenge at work or home, walking gives you time to reflect. 'I try to walk home from the office once or twice a week,' says Katie, 26, from north London. 'It helps me escape my computer and emails, and gives me space to think through new projects.'

For children, the words 'let's go for a walk' might trigger groans of protest, but with a little imagination you can turn a trial into a treat. 'Children need paths to explore... paths down the garden, the way to school, corridors through the bracken or long grass,' wrote the late travel writer Bruce Chatwin. If you can, create ways to plan routes that will trigger children's curiosity and sense of discovery.

Sarah, 38, from Tonbridge in Kent, uses a storytelling approach with her nieces, Becky, seven, and Amelia, five. 'I devised a short route around the Ashdown Forest where we read out a few snippets from *Winnie The Pooh* and even played a game of Pooh Sticks. The girls were hooked.'

Boost your body

'Walking is man's best medicine,' said Ancient Greek physician Hippocrates, although he was probably talking more from gut instinct than medical research. These days, there is plenty of scientific evidence to show that regular walking helps reduce the risk of high blood pressure, raised levels of cholesterol, heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and some cancers.

The government recommend at least 30 minutes of brisk walking or other physical activity five times a >