

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

Outdoor Exercise the Best Medicine

By Keith Hammer

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Whether young or old, it is never too early or too late to develop good habits of regular exercise in the outdoors. It costs nothing to reap the free health benefits offered by such exercise and it behooves us to safeguard nearby opportunities to walk, bike, ski, and run safely.

While walking with a friend and her dogs the other day, we met an elderly woman also out walking. She commented she had started walking every day and found she slept better. She is far from alone in her discovery.

Steve Gaskill, University of Montana professor in Health and Human Performance, recently put it this way: "Exercise is the cheapest medicine one can have and attacks the most number of diseases. It's the one medicine that actually makes us feel better when we take it, and it's free."

Gaskill's comment hits the nail on the head. We don't need to understand all of the scientific research to know that exercise makes us feel better. And it is but a small leap of faith to conclude that something that makes us feel genuinely good while we do it is also likely to make us feel better in the long term.

One need only scan headlines to sense the harm lack of exercise does to public health: "Obesity rates climbing in U.S.; Fatter Americans – more children and men are getting fat; The real pandemic – the percentage of overweight children has tripled in less than 20 years, and the consequences will be a heavy burden; High schoolers flunk fitness – only 2 percent in Missoula meet national marks, researchers say."

Another statement by Steve Gaskill, as reported in the *Missoulian*, sheds some light on why it is important kids get outside for some exercise: "We thought Missoula would be better than the rest of the country because of our access to the outdoors and all the recreational opportunities we have here, but in reality, we are mirroring the rest of the country." This is worrisome, Gaskill concludes, because physical inactivity breeds both emotional and physical health problems and is directly related to absenteeism and poor academic performance.

While youth still lag behind adults in rates of obesity, they are closing the gap and setting themselves up for "an increased risk for diabetes, heart problems and other chronic diseases that contribute to greater health care costs." So reported the Associated Press in 2007. When it comes to diabetes, however, the results are being reported in more concrete terms than just "risk." The *Daily Inter Lake* reported in 2006 "a disease once called adult onset diabetes is now so prevalent in children it is now called Type II diabetes."

Fortunately, many say the answer to this health crisis rooted in obesity, which cost Americans \$117 billion in 2000 and threatens to overwhelm American society in the foreseeable future, is not all that complicated. "If you're diabetic, regular exercise can reduce – and even eliminate – the need for medication," announces AARP.

AARP also reports that, according to Dr. Stephen Ilardi, we can avoid popping pills to beat depression if we instead “go outside, get physical, yak with our neighbors, and ... not be ignorant of how our technology can sometimes be our own worst enemy.” Indeed, there is little disagreement that we need to spend less time in front of our television and computer screens and more time exercising to improve our physical and mental health.

The bonus, for young and old alike, is that developing good exercise habits is also good for family and community. While there is nothing wrong with a solo walk in the outdoors, sharing that walk with someone else helps pass along a healthy habit to the next person and the companionship perhaps heals our hearts in a way that can only be describe as extra-cardio-vascular.

Helping create safe neighborhood bike and walking paths contributes to healthy exercise habits, as does conserving quiet places in the outdoors where we can escape the nerve-wracking sounds of motor vehicles. In 2007, AARP’s article titled “America the Tranquil” reported on several quiet places to visit. Most were National Parks, but disconcertingly were described with caveats that visits must avoid areas and times disturbed by helicopters, planes, boats, and other motor vehicles.

The Flathead Valley is becoming more urban but it need not become unsuitable for healthy outdoor exercise and quiet recreation. A network of valley bottom walking and bike trails, linked to quiet backcountry trails in the Swan Range and elsewhere is a worthy vision and a worthy endeavor. Indeed, our health and that of our children depend on it.

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A young Swan Ranger growls like a grizzly and gets some exercise with his mom along the Broken Leg Trail in the Swan Range. Photo by Keith Hammer.