PLANT LIFE COLUMN

WALK FOR HEALTH

Move it or lose it! That is the message from world health leaders concerned about our sedentary lifestyle. April 7, World Healthy Day, is an annual celebration promoted by the World Health Organization (WHO). Leaders of 191 member countries focus on an important health issue each year. This year's theme, "Agita Mundo- Move for Health," encourages citizens to be more active. (Agitar means to shake or wave; mundo means world)

The Office of Greenways and Trails in Tallahassee has joined with the Florida Department of Health to promote the health benefits of using our network of trails. Get into the woods for a walk or bike one of our local trails and get a move on.

Osceola County Greenways and Trails planning team has updated "The Osceola Pathfinder" to provide easy access to information on local trails for hiking, biking, skating, walking and horseback riding. Call 407-846-4181 to request a print copy or go online to http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu/nat/natrec.htm to access the newsletter online. The guide includes directions and phone numbers for paved and natural trails as well as descriptions.

It may seem hard to get off the couch or squeeze in enough personal time to do exercise but your body and your family will thank you for it.

Poor nutrition and inactivity are major contributors to poor health. According to the Florida Department of Health, nearly 40% of deaths in Osceola County in 2000 were from cardiovascular disease. Florida statistics show that obesity has increased more than 60% since 1986.

Regular physical activity, including walking and biking, has many health benefits. Not only does it boost your energy, but it also builds stronger bones and muscles, improves your immune system, reduces stress, anxiety and depression, helps to with weight control and prevents chronic disease.

US Secretary of Health and Human Services, Tommy Thompson, encourages youth and adults to be more active. For children, he recommends 60 minutes a day, including play time. It is important to get away from the tv and computer for physical activities. Teens and adults need at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity a day. That can include cleaning, gardening, basketball, raking, pushing a mower and other activities.

Have you been using the excuse that exercise costs too much? According to a report by the American Association for World Health (AAPH), active Americans save an average of $500 annually on medical costs compared to those who do not participate in regular physical activity. That savings will easily cover the cost of a new bike, roller blades or a membership at the YMCA or local health club.

Both employers and employees participating in health programs benefit from fewer sick days, lower medical costs, increased job satisfaction and increased productivity. Regular physical activity can also help smokers cut down or even stop smoking.

Walking, skating and biking have health benefits but participation in these activities has declined in recent years. Between 1977 and 1995, trips made by walking declined while driving trips increased, according to AAWH. Children between the ages of 5 and 15 today walk or ride their bikes 40% less than children in 1977. Only 2% of school trips under two miles are made by bicycling. While 25% of all trips made are one mile or less, 75% of them are made by driving.

We are automobile addicts. My teenager can't wait to get a car and burn up the highway despite the cheap
student fare of 25 cents for Lynx transportation. It is surely cheaper than gas, insurance and the car payment she will have.

Community planners can help us improve our health by reducing some impediments to getting outside. Provide inviting walks through wider sidewalks with attractive landscaping, shade, night lighting and resting areas. Install areas to safely lock bicycles at shopping centers and stores. Create safer cross walks. New road projects are including sidewalks and the cities have been looking at strategies for more walkable communities.

Osceola County is also in the process of developing a master plan to be sure that bicyclists and pedestrians have better access around the county for transportation as well as recreation. I can't help but think this will reduce traffic congestion and benefit the environment as well as our health.

Get moving today and join citizens around the world. Take some steps on our trails to improve your health.

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