

Yes! You can get some exercise, even when the weather turns wild

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When the temperature dips below freezing and ice and snow cover the sidewalks and roads, it's challenging for people who walk for exercise to get their physical fitness in. But as many preambulators know, it just takes a willingness to change your scenery to keep those legs moving.

For instance, The Lakes Mall opens its main doors to walkers at 7 a.m. Monday through Saturday and 8 a.m. on Sundays.

"We welcome walkers," said Marketing Director Pat Strum. "We have a walking program sponsored by Mercy General Health Partners."

The program, Healthy Herons, encourages people to walk the mall for fitness, noting one lap around the mall — not cutting out any corners — is one-half mile long. There's also a log book available to Healthy Herons near the service desk where they can pick up a form and then mark off the days when they've walked.

"We definitely encourage (walking), especially in this kind of weather," Strum said. "People don't want to lose their momentum from the warmer months."

But mall walking is not just for winter. "It's also nice in the summer when it's really, really hot," Strum said.

The program sponsorship has been in place for three or four years, according to Kelly Kurburski, director of public relations and marketing for Mercy General Health Partners. "It allows us to work with the mall and do monthly blood pressure checks," Kurburski said. "When people look at remaining healthy and staying active in the community, it's one way we can help them with that; it's a form of exercise when the weather is an issue. You need a good pair of shoes and that's about it."

Dave Piercy of Norton Shores has been coming to the mall to walk every morning since right after Christmas, he said.

"It's fantastic," Piercy said. "I prefer walking. You can socialize."

In warmer weather, he likes

to walk outside or bike, but for now, the mall is the perfect spot for him. "You can't do much with a treadmill," he said.

For those who don't want to go to the mall, an indoor walking spot may be as close as the nearest school. Many area school districts have buildings open during the school year for walkers.

"We always welcome people to walk at the high school," said Deb Delora, administrative assistant for Orchard View Schools. "We've had quite a few."

On one recent night, 18 people showed up to walk on the high school's indoor track, which is one-tenth of a mile long, Delora said.

"It's wonderful that they have this open," said Isabel Blake-Evans of Norton Shores, who was walking at Mona Shores High School Wednesday night.

Blake-Evans prefers to walk a trail in the woods, but an empty school building pinch hits just fine. "You can't make as many excuses," she said. "As long as this is available, I just do this."

On the polar opposite end of the spectrum is Cari Draft Elliott, owner of EcoTrek Fitness, an outdoors fitness program.

Elliott takes groups of up to 15 people on 75-minute-long fitness treks in many of the area's parks and lakefront areas. She's only canceled a trek once — when the wind chill was 25 below.

"I have a saying that there's no such thing as bad weather, just bad choices in clothing," she said. She encourages people to dress in layers, and uses "Yax Trax," rubber tubing that stretches over shoes to provide traction, to allow for exercise outside in wintery weather.

In nicer weather, treks include running or, as she calls it, "scampering," but on snow and ice, she sticks to hiking livened up with some stops for strength training, stretching and yoga. During the next two weeks, as part of a break between trek sessions, she'll be leading snowshoeing excursions.

"When you're out moving around your body is definitely going to stay warm," Elliott said. "It's great to be outside in the wintertime."

Walking in a winter wonderland

Schools open for warmer walking

• Fruitport Schools

Beach and Shettler Elementaries: 4-5:30 p.m. Monday-Friday.

Edgewood Elementary: 4-8 p.m. Monday-Friday.

• Mona Shores Public Schools

High school, middle school and Campbell, Lincoln Park and Ross Park Elementaries: 5:30-8 p.m. Monday-Friday.

Churchill Elementary: 6:15-8 p.m. Monday-Friday.

Administration building, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday-Friday.

• Muskegon Public Schools

Glenside School: 4-6 p.m. Monday-Thursday. M-TEC: 3:30-9 p.m. Monday-Thursday.

• Oakridge School District

High school and middle school, evenings Monday-Friday.

• Orchard View Schools

High school, 2:30-7 p.m. Monday-Friday.

• Reeths-Puffer Schools

High school, 5:30-8 p.m., Monday, Wednesday, Thursday.

Middle school and Reeths-Puffer Elementary: 4-8 p.m., Monday-Friday.

• Whitehall Schools

Community Services building, 8 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., Monday-Friday.

Note: School activities or events may interfere with walking.

On the 'Net

• EcoTrek programs

www.ecotrekfitness.com