Walk This Way
Susan Johnson

Maybe you've heard of it. Nordic walking. Also known as fitness walking, exerstriding, urban poling and power poling. Whatever you choose to call it, pole walking is a fitness 'craze' that has been around for almost 25 years now, but is still a relatively new practice in many in many parts of the country. Created in Finland in the early 1990's, pole walking was introduced as a summer training method for cross-country skiers. Especially beneficial for older adults, "poling" can facilitate movement after some types of surgery, help with weight loss and increase cardiovascular health. And that's not all!

According to a Mayo Clinic Healthy Lifestyle & Fitness article by Dr. Edward Laskowski, walking with poles can help you turn your evening stroll around the block into a work out that will benefit your entire body! As Dr. Laskowski pointed out, use of poles can add intensity to your workout, improve your balance and stability, help you maintain proper posture, increase strength in the muscles of the upper back and reduce stress on the lower back, hips and knees - making it the perfect exercise for those with arthritis or back problems. (As always, check with your health practitioner before adding any new exercise to your routine.)

Sheila Vidamour is a fitness instructor who partnered with the Council on Aging a few years back to offer pole walking to anyone in St. Johns County who might be interested in learning to 'walk this way'. "When we first started, there were three or four of us who walked regularly" says Sheila. "Now we have about 20 in this particular group." Walkers meet at Eddie Vickers Park on Riberia St. for warm-ups, laps and cool-downs. A free introductory clinic is offered every month at River House, 179 Marine St; the clinic is mandatory for those interested in signing up for the walking classes.

What's so great about pole walking? I wondered that myself so decided to ask the experts. Listen in:

Bill Robinson has been pole walking for two years. He started when leg problems limited his ability to walk. "Using poles allows me to walk much further than I could without them." An added benefit is that Bill has experienced a noticeable drop in his blood sugar levels since starting his pole walking regimen.

Gerry Luckenbach is even more enthusiastic. "Pole walking has given me my life back! I've lost a considerable amount of weight and am even back to riding my bike."

But the stories don't stop there. Jan Felixson took up pole walking after a serious health scare. "Ever since my cancer treatment 11 years ago my balance has been off". Pole walking has changed that for the better. And, according to Jan, it also "creates aerobic activity and increases my pulmonary capacity." Who wouldn't want that?!?

Margo Masson, 90, also participates in pole walking. She started about 18 months ago as a way to get outside, get some exercise and improve her balance. Has it helped? “Well, I know everyone out here now and I’m outside and active so I would say ‘yes! Pole walking offers more stability and is so much better than a walking cane. It’s wonderful!”

Margo isn’t alone in her belief that pole walking comes out ahead of other forms of moving your feet! In fact, according to a May, 2010 study by researchers at McGill University and published by the Canadian Physiotherapy Association, pole walking proved to be125% more effective in improving gait speed compared to normal walking. Other research indicates that pole walking is a safe form of rehabilitation for heart patients. (Walker Porari, Brice, Terry. Acute responses to using walking poles in patients with coronary artery disease. J Cardiopu. Rehabil Jul-Aug;16(4), 245-50, 1996) and that it reduces fatigue when compared with ‘just walking.’ (University of Wisconsin, Stoughton, 1992) (Theses)

So there you have it! The next free clinic is scheduled for Friday, May 15th at 10 am at River House, 179 Marine St. If you’re ready to grab a pole and try your hand...and feet!....at pole walking, please call the COA’s River House at (904) 209-3655. It’s that easy!