OPINION
Record-Courier
WEDNESDAY
SEPTEMBER 14, 2011
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Take a hike, literally

Portage Park District's Wild Hikes Challenge a great way to keep fit

PORTAGE PARK DISTRICT

GREEN PORTAGE

Angela DeJulius



The current arguments about health care reform and rising medical costs beg the question: Is there anything left in health care that does not involve pre-approval, a hefty deductible, complex regulations, and some risky side effects?

Yes, and in fact it is free. It can be found in your local park district. Walking. If your doctor did not mention this at your last visit, maybe you should bring it up next time. Especially if you've been seeing your doctor for blood pressure, cholesterol, diabetes, obesity, depression, back pain, osteoporosis...

I am amazed when people talk about new medicines that they saw on TV. "I think I should try this new pill. They say it is the best thing for (insert common chronic condition here)." Seriously? It's $210 per month and has essentially no track record, but you want to put it in your body every day and see what happens? No thanks.

Take a hike, literally!

It is true that regular walking can improve many common, chronic conditions. And like many medicines, regular exercise follows a dose-response relationship — higher doses yield greater benefits. It's not just about fat, it's about fit.

If you have been driving to an exercise facility, try stopping at one of the county's parks or trailheads instead. Given a list of exercise options, I think going round in circles on a track or pounding away on a machine would be my last choice, reserved for the darkest days of winter.

Until those days arrive, consider this deal — the Portage Park District's 2011 Wild Hikes Challenge. It's free. If you complete the program, you will get a hiking stick and a brass tag to show off. (While not required, to help offset costs the Park District does appreciate donations of $10 per stick and $5 per per tag). It's really more economical than most other fitness programs, which take your money up front regardless of whether you stick with it.

In previous years, I have tried and failed to complete the Challenge (you need to walk eight of the Portage Park District trails by Dec. 1). But along the way I have enjoyed time with my friends and my dogs, and discovered some great outdoor places that I will visit again and again. You might also discover a deer or a blue heron, wild berries, butterflies, and/or a strange sense of well-being and peace of mind. Even if you fail, you still win.

Speaking of friends, here's a sobering thought. Analysis of data on sets of friends from the well-known Framingham Heart Study showed that if one friend became obese during a given time interval, the other friend was 171 percent more likely to become obese as well. They found a similar phenomenon among siblings. So ... it really does make sense to get your friends and family out there walking!

Information, maps, and registration forms for the 2011 Wild Hikes Challenge can be found on the website, www.portageparkdistrict.org.

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