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Cobblestones are Good for You

By CHRISTOPHER SHEA

According to a study published in August in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, if you want to be a fitter, more relaxed, more agile retiree, the prescription is to walk on cobblestones.

Specially designed paths lined with river stones are a common sight in Chinese parks, and the people who traverse them in bare or stocking feet report that they feel at once soothed and invigorated. Fuzhong Li, a researcher at the Oregon Research Institute, started thinking about the paths during trips to Shanghai, and he and two other researchers resolved to test the walkers' claims. Financed by the National Institute on Aging, they recruited 54 sedentary but healthy men and women, ages 60 to 92, to walk in socks three times a week for 16 weeks on special cobblestone mats. The test subjects were eased into the walking routine - since the stones were uncomfortable for some at first - building up to a half-hour of mat time per session. Meanwhile, a control group of 54 took part in more conventional walking exercises.

At the end of the 16 weeks, the mat-walkers had lower blood pressure than the control subjects (by 9 points systolic and 6 points diastolic, on average), could get up more quickly from a seated position, walk 50 feet faster and stand with more stability when one foot was placed in front of the other, heel to toe. (Some critics noted the level of selectivity in the study: the 108 subjects were drawn from an original pool of nearly 500, with the balance disqualified for reasons that included poor health.) Within two months of the study's publication, the research center sold out its supply of 1,000 mats, acquired from a Chinese company, at \$25 each. Especially cheered by the article have been reflexologists, who contend, with little other evidence to support them, that foot massage has wondrous effects on organs throughout the body.