

Walking for Your Health

While physical fitness should be an important part of our lives, we often find excuses not to exercise: a gym membership costs too much, we do not have the correct equipment, we are unfamiliar with the exercise or we do not have time. Now is the time to banish the excuses and start walking for your health. Walking requires little guidance and equipment and can be done almost anywhere. Learn more about walking and its benefits.

The Benefits Of Walking

Walking is a form of exercise that is hard to beat. Not only is it free, but it can be done almost anywhere, at any time, and with little or no equipment. When done properly, walking can:

- Burn calories, almost as many calories as jogging does
- Strengthen bones, reducing the risk of osteoporosis, a condition in which bone mass is lost
- Lower blood pressure and cholesterol
- Keep muscles flexible and in shape
- Offer physical benefits that do not stress the joints
- Reduce the risk of diabetes, heart disease and other illnesses
- Lower the risk of depression.

No matter what age or physical shape you are in, most individuals will enjoy the benefits that come from walking for fitness.

Planning a Routine

While every type of exercise depends on the individual, most experts recommend 10,000 steps a day. (Americans average about 5,000 steps daily.) Without a pedometer, it can be difficult to gauge how many steps you take. However, an easier estimate is to aim for one hour of walking three to four times per week. For weight-loss purposes, experts recommend walking one hour a day five or six days per week. Short bursts of walking are better than nothing at all, so feel free to divide your walking into 20-minute segments three times per day.

In general, individuals will want to aim for 60 to 80 percent of their maximum heart rate. To find your maximum heart rate, women should subtract their age from 226; men should subtract their age from 220. Consult your doctor for a specific target heart rate range for maximum benefits.

Incorporating small stints of jogging into your walking routine can offer additional benefits. Running, even for 60 seconds, signals your bones to add mass, helping to prevent osteoporosis. Walking in a zig-zag, side-to-side or forward-and-backward fashion can also help to increase bone mass.

Proper Walking Techniques

Regardless of whether your goal is to lose weight or keep in top physical condition, you will want to maintain proper walking form. Proper form will reduce the chances of injury, increase the number of calories you burn and maximize your output. Follow these guidelines when you walk:

- Keep your head up and centered, and focus your eyes straight ahead of you.

- Your shoulders should be relaxed, not tightened, and your chest should be lifted slightly.
- Keep your arms bent at a 90-degree angle, and swing them forward and backward, not to the side. Cup your hands, but do not make a tight fist.
- Your abdominals should be flexed slightly, to straighten your spine. Ideally you should feel taller and stronger.
- Breathing should be steady and even, and heartbeats should be regular.

When walking, it is important to get the most out of your hips, thighs and feet. Make most of your movement through your hips rather than your thighs, and keep your hips loose. Short strides will feel more natural than long ones. Your foot contact should offer a rolling effect: Land firmly on the heel, then roll smoothly up to your toe, pushing the ground away from you.

Equipment for Walking

One of the great things about walking is that it is free. However, having the proper equipment will help to ensure you get the most from walking and prevent injury. Keep the following in mind when you decide to start a walking program:

- **Walking shoes:** These are an important investment, especially if you plan to walk a good amount. Do not substitute running shoes for walking shoes; shoes for walking are built with a higher heel and a less flexible toe for proper form. Look for a shoe that offers a heel-to-toe rolling motion, and replace your shoes every 300 to 500 miles.
- **Comfortable clothing:** You will not need anything fancy, just items to protect you from the elements. A good pair of socks will help prevent blisters or other foot conditions. Look for ones with extra cushion or padded soles. Be sure to wear sunscreen, and carry a bottle of water with you when walking outdoors.
- **Pedometer:** A digital pedometer helps calculate your activity based on the amount of steps you take. When used in conjunction with your walking workouts, it offers an objective measurement of your activity and can motivate you to take those extra steps.
- **Walking poles:** Walking poles can help increase the intensity of your walking workout; the number of calories you burn; and the amount of exercise your arms, chest, back and shoulders receive. However, you need to use walking poles correctly to reap any benefits. If you walk in areas that are hilly or rugged, they can also provide extra stability.
- **Heart rate monitor:** This is especially important if you suffer from an illness or disease, since a heart rate monitor gauges what limit your body is at. If your goal is to achieve a target heart rate without pushing yourself too far, a heart rate monitor can tell you what you need to know.

As with any new exercise program, consult your physician for more information before you begin working out.

Resources

- President's Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition: www.fitness.gov
- American Heart Association: www.heart.org
- National Institutes of Health: www.nih.gov
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases: www.niddk.nih.gov

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