

Week One

Walking 101

The popularity of walking as a fitness activity has grown by leaps and bounds. Walking is low-risk and easy to start, and it has proven health benefits.

A regular walking program can:

- Improve your cholesterol profile
- Boost your bone strength
- Lower blood pressure
- Prevent weight gain
- Increase your energy and stamina

Experts at the American Heart Association recommend that every American adult engage in 30 minutes or more of moderate intensity physical activity just about every day of the week, at least 2½ hours per week. You can do that by walking two miles briskly (about four miles an hour). If this is too fast, choose a more comfortable pace.

Get Ready!

It's simple to start a walking program! All you need are comfortable clothes and supportive shoes. Layer loose clothing, keeping in mind that brisk exercise elevates the body's temperature. Shoes specifically designed for walking or running are best. Make sure you have a little wiggle room (½") between your longest toe and the end of your shoe. Avoid cotton socks since they retain moisture and can promote blisters.

Technique

- **Begin with short distances.** Start with a stroll that feels comfortable (perhaps 5–10 minutes) and gradually increase your time or distance each week by 10–20 percent (add just a few minutes or blocks). If it's easier on your joints and your schedule to take a couple of shorter walks (10–20 minutes) instead of one long walk (30–40 minutes) each day, do it!
- **Focus on posture.** Keep your head lifted, tummy pulled in and shoulders relaxed. Swing your arms naturally. Avoid carrying hand weights; they put excessive stress on the elbows and shoulders. Don't overstride. Select a comfortable, natural step length. If you want to move faster, pull your back leg through more quickly.
- **Breathe deeply.** If you can't talk or catch your breath while walking, slow down. Speed isn't important at first — just establish the walking habit.

Intensity

To warm up, walk at an easy tempo for the first several minutes. Then gradually adopt a more purposeful pace. You can incorporate some brisk intervals to add variety. For example, walk one block fast, two blocks slow and repeat several times. Gradually add more fast intervals with shorter recovery periods. Concentrate on increasing your speed while maintaining good posture.

Walking hills is a great way to tone your legs. Using Nordic walking poles can boost the calorie-burning value of your walk while promoting good posture and overall muscle endurance. Treadmill walking is a good option during inclement weather.

The end of your walk is an ideal time to stretch since your body is warmed up. Stretch your hamstrings and calves (important walking muscles) as well as your chest, shoulders and back. Hold each stretch for 15–30 seconds.

Track your progress. Experts recommend that you walk at least 30 minutes a day. If walking is part of your weight-loss plan, more is better. Walking 60 minutes a day at brisk intervals will help you burn more calories. Fit walking into your schedule whenever you can. That may mean three 10-minute walks over the course of a day. The best schedule is one that keeps you walking and keeps you fit!

Safety

Listen to lively music while you walk to energize your workout. But if you wear headphones, keep the volume down and watch out for traffic.

Wear light colors or reflective clothing and carry a flashlight or glow stick so you can be seen if you walk when visibility is low.

Stick to sidewalks when you can, and choose streets with lower speed limits. Faster streets are riskier because motorists are less likely to see pedestrians and can't stop as quickly.

Know your area. Which businesses are open? Where are emergency telephones located? Walk on well-traveled streets rather than taking shortcuts in alleys or parking lots. Be calm and self-assured and walk purposefully to lower your chances of becoming a victim.

Two heads are better than one. Walking with a partner or in groups discourages crime and may help alert you to dangers such as speeding motorists or unleashed dogs.

If you have foot, knee, hip or back pain when walking, STOP and check with your doctor. You may need special exercises or better shoes. If you have osteoarthritis and have increased joint pain that lasts an hour or two after walking, consider another activity like stationary cycling or water exercise. Don't stop exercising altogether!



Week Two

How to Stretch, Warm Up and Cool Down

Warm Up

Begin with low-intensity aerobic activity that warms up the muscles you will be using during your workout. If you're a walker, this simply means you should walk at an easy pace for the first few minutes of your walk. Then, over the course of your warm-up, gradually increase your pace. The duration of the warm-up activity will depend on the intensity of your walk and your fitness level.

Stretching

Flexibility exercises may be included *after* your warm-up, or, even better, at the end of your walk. Stretching muscles after warming them up with low-intensity aerobic activity will produce a better stretch since the rise in muscle temperature and circulation increases muscle elasticity, making them more pliable. Be sure to choose flexibility exercises that stretch the primary muscles you will be using during your workout. Great stretches for walking include: hamstrings, Achilles tendons and calves, hip flexors, abductors, as well as upper body stretches such as opening the chest and stretching the low back.

Here are some great stretches you can try:

Hamstring Stretch:

Prop one foot up on a low secure bench or stair step. Stand tall. Keeping your chest high, hips square and tailbone lifted, bend forward from your hips. Feel a stretch in the back of your thigh or knee. Hold 20–30 seconds on each leg.

Calf Stretch:

Stand facing a wall with both hands on it. Position one foot forward (knee bent) and the other leg back with the leg straight, toes pointing at the wall. With your stomach tight, lean in toward the wall until you feel a stretch in the lower part of the back leg. Hold 20–30 seconds on each leg.

Shoulder Rolls:

Lift your shoulders up toward your ears, then down and backwards in a circular motion. Repeat 5–10 times. Perform with both shoulders simultaneously or alternate right and left.

Hip Flexor Stretch:

Lunge forward with one leg, knee bent. The back leg can stay straight or bend slightly. Push your hips forward until you feel a stretch in front of your back thigh near the groin. Keep your torso upright and your front knee behind your toes. Hold 20–30 seconds on each leg.

Abductor (inner thigh) stretch:

Keeping your torso upright, lunge to one side with a bent knee over the toe. Keep your other leg straight. Push your weight to the “bent knee” side until you feel a stretch in the inner thigh of your straight leg. Hold 20–30 seconds on each leg.

Chest stretch:

Place your fingertips lightly on the back of your head. Push your elbows back while squeezing with your upper back until you feel a stretch in your chest near your underarms. Hold for 20–30 seconds.

Another option is to stand in a corner with one hand or elbow on each wall. Your feet should be 1½–2 feet away from the corner in a split stance. Keeping your back straight and tummy pulled in, lean into the wall until you feel a stretch in your chest near your underarms. Hold for 20–30 seconds.

Cool Down

The purpose of a cool-down is to lower the heart rate and metabolism slowly, which helps to avoid blood pooling, cramping or stiffness after a workout. By cooling down, you ensure circulation is maintained to vital organs so you’re less likely to become lightheaded or dizzy. The heart is also protected by cooling down because it reduces high concentrations of hormones, like adrenaline. A great way to cool down after walking is to go at a slower pace and to stretch the muscles that you just worked.



Week Three

Fitting Fitness Into a Busy Schedule

By now you know that exercise is good for you, and that you should do something regularly, like walking. What's the best time to exercise? Anytime!

A healthy exercise program includes muscle strengthening, flexibility training and plenty of aerobic exercise such as walking.

Creative Scheduling

Even with a busy schedule, you can find creative ways to make time for walking. If you can fit in two 10-minute sessions during the day, it will benefit you almost as much as one 20-minute session. (Updated guidelines from the US Department of Health and Human Services [2008], the American Heart Association and American College of Sports Medicine [2007] state that moderate-intensity activity such as brisk walking can be performed in 10-minute bouts for improved health.) You just need to fit in a total of 2½ hours over the course of a week.

- **You can easily accomplish 10–15 minute sessions** by walking around the neighborhood after work, walking to a lunch spot that's 10 minutes away or heading to the corner store for a few items. Instead of seeking the closest spot, save time, frustration and gas by parking farther from your destination and using the time and energy to walk. Or, if you take the bus, get off a stop earlier and take a brisk walk.
- **To catch up with an old friend, schedule a walk together.** It's a great way to get some exercise and fresh air while you're enjoying each other's company. Chances are that you'll be so focused on the conversation that you'll walk farther than you planned.
- **Do you or your friend have a pet?** If so, volunteer to be the official dog walker and everyone will get more exercise — including the dog!
- **During the work day, take the long way to the copier or restroom.** Walk over to talk to someone instead of calling. Instead of a coffee break, take a 10-minute walk break! You'll burn a few extra calories and prevent stiffness.
- **Discuss business plans with colleagues while going for a short walk** instead of sitting at a desk. Develop a new corporate culture of "walking meetings."
- **On weekends, take a walk to reconnect with your family members.** If the kids want to go to the park or a friend's house, walk to get there.
- **Turn shopping into an aerobic activity.** Shopping is walking, so don't stop for 10 minutes straight and you've worked in one of your daily sessions! Check with your local mall for mall walker programs, and you'll have company.

Week Four

Stepping Out: 5 Ways to Make Walking More Fun

- 1. Urban walk.** Start at a slow pace for five minutes. After you're warmed up, alternate between a slow and rapid pace for each city block. Take flights of stairs two at a time. Find a bus stop or a park bench and do some stretching to cool down.
- 2. Mall walk.** Indoor malls give you a safe environment with restrooms, water, refreshments, and interesting sights, no matter what the weather or time of day.
- 3. Tourist walk.** Walking can help you manage jetlag as well as explore a new locale. Check with the hotel or tourist information center for safe routes and sightseeing maps.
- 4. Meditation walk.** Focus on the soles of your feet meeting the ground and notice the pressure changes as you stride. Awaken all your senses to what you hear, see, smell, and feel.
- 5. Forest or creek walk.** Start with easy trails. Carry bottled water, dress in layers, and wear waterproof shoes in damp areas. Look for waterfalls and other natural wonders.



Source: The Walking Deck: 50 Ways to Walk Yourself Healthy, by Shirley Archer, published by Chronicle Books. *Reprint permission granted from Hope Health - www.hopehealth.com

Week Five

Time of Day Tips

Tips for Early Morning Walkers:

- The night before, get your walking clothes and shoes ready so it's easy to put them on and head out the door.
- An MP3 player or other portable music device programmed with uptempo music or set to your favorite radio station can keep you moving at a brisk pace. Just make sure you can still hear traffic.
- Stretch your calves and hamstrings at the end of your walk. Watch a morning news show or check your email while stretching.
- If it's dark outside, wear clothing with reflective stripes so motorists can see you.

Congratulations! You're getting your day started right!

Tips for Lunchtime Walkers:

- Schedule your lunchtime walk in your work calendar. Think of it as an important appointment, which it is!
- If you can, keep everything you'll need for walking at work. This way you won't find yourself saying "I forgot my shoes. I can't go."
- Recruit a couple of colleagues to join you so you can keep each other on track.
- Depending on your walking pace, the weather and your tendency to sweat during exercise, you may be able to wear your work clothes and just switch to athletic shoes. Or you may prefer to slip on a T-shirt. In cooler weather, you might need a jacket, hat or gloves. If you're walking briskly, you'll heat up after about 10 minutes, so avoid the tendency to overdress. You'll be **MOVING, not sitting** in the fresh air!
- Pick a route where you can grab a healthy snack or lunch at the end of your walk, or better yet, pack your own.

Congratulations on fitting in fitness!

Tips for After-Work Walkers:

- Have a light snack at about 4 p.m. (for example, a fat-free, 1% fat or low-fat unsweetened yogurt and one tablespoon of unsalted almonds (about 4–6 nuts), or an apple and 1 oz of fat-free, 1% fat or low-fat cheese) so you don't experience a late-day dip in energy and talk yourself out of walking.
- Pick an area that's not heavily trafficked since rush hour can increase air pollutants.
- Walk tall and do some backward shoulder rolls to relieve work stress.
- If it's dark, wear clothing with reflective strips so motorists can see you.

Congratulations on taking care of yourself!

Week Six

Staying Motivated/Getting Back on Track

Are you finding it difficult to get out of bed in the morning for your daily walk? Are you making up excuses to skip the walk at lunchtime? Even the most dedicated exercisers occasionally get bored with their routines. Waning motivation, cutting workouts short and not having your old enthusiasm all are signs of a stale exercise regimen.

Quick Fix

First, evaluate your routine to determine what really bores you. A new variation on your favorite activity — such as a scenic new route — may reinvigorate a stale course. If you've always walked indoors, logging miles on a treadmill or indoor track, move your workout outside for a change of scenery. Hike on trails; walk through a park or around a lake.

Good Company

Walking alone often is an oasis of solitude in a busy day, but maybe you need some company. Ask a friend to be your walking partner — you're much less likely to skip a workout if someone is waiting for you. Just about every sport or activity has a club; to find one, ask around at gyms or local community centers. Keeping up with the crowd also means that you'll be challenged to improve and take your walking workouts to a new level.

Challenge Yourself

Many exercisers walk simply to stay in shape, and most of the time that's just fine. But setting a goal, such as walking a 5k or 10k race — especially one that benefits a charity or cause such as fighting heart disease — will give your daily workouts more meaning. Start by incorporating bursts of speed into your walks. After a gentle warm-up, alternate a fast pace with a slower one for recovery. This can be as simple as speed walking to the next tree, or as structured as timed intervals on a track or walking up stadium steps.

Add Variety

Elite triathletes pioneered the concept of cross-training, and it works for the rest of us, too. If you usually focus on one activity, such as walking, substitute another a few days a week. Consider adding 1–2 days of strength training exercises to your routine. Ideally, any exercise program should include moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity, muscle strengthening exercise and flexibility. A certified personal trainer can help you if you've never tried this type of workout.



New Toys

Small exercise gadgets aren't necessary, but they can make your workouts more fun and challenging. Pedometers, heart-rate monitors and MP3 players are just a few items to consider. Find out which new training gadgets are available for your favorite activity. Even buying new walking shoes or clothes can inspire you to get out and use them.

When You've Gotten Off Track

When you've lapsed from exercise, identify where you went wrong. Was it illness, bad weather, travel or staying busy with a big project at work? Figure out what caused you to break your good habits and ways you can avoid this in the future. Then look at your schedule to see where you can fit in your daily walks. Even if you have limited time, try to fit a couple of 10–15 minute brisk walks in during the day. Remember, some exercise is far better than none, but make sure you get at least 150 minutes (2½ hours) per week of moderate-intensity aerobic activity.

Take a Break

Sometimes you really do need time off. In that case, cut back on your usual routine or tweak it. You might even find a new twist that you enjoy more than your old standby. Once you've fought your first battle with boredom, you'll know the tricks to keep your routine from becoming too routine. Trying new routes, new challenges and new activities — and learning how to throw a little variety into your tried-and-true routine — can help you avoid making creative excuses to not exercise.

