

Walking for Exercise

Walking burns calories, is good for your heart, improves muscle tone and relieves stress. It's also one of the easiest and best forms of exercise there is. If you're already a regular walker, read about how to fit more walking into your life. If you're not, read on to learn about the many benefits of walking and how to get started on a walking routine today.

The benefits of walking

Exercise, including walking, is good for your mind, body and soul. Consider these facts:

Walkers live longer. Research shows that fit and active people who walk have about half the risk of cardiovascular disease compared to unfit, inactive people. Brisk walking conditions the heart, improves muscle tone, and helps with back pain, osteoporosis, respiratory problems, Type 2 diabetes and arthritis. It also helps to reduce blood pressure and the risk for certain types of cancer.

Walking burns calories. For every mile you walk, you may burn 95 to 100 calories. Walking is a great way to lose weight, keep the weight off, and stay in shape.

Walking helps you sleep better.

Walking relieves stress and symptoms of depression. Research shows that when people who are depressed start a walking routine, they become less depressed.

In addition to these advantages, going outside has benefits of its own. Outdoor air is generally cleaner than indoor air, research has found. Depending on your location and the time of year, when you're in the sun, your skin absorbs ultraviolet light and converts it into Vitamin D, a nutrient vital to bone growth and strength. Also, studies have found that gazing at grass, trees or other greenery can help to improve your attention and performance on everyday tasks.

Getting started on a walking program

To stay fit, you need to get at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise every week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has found. Aerobic exercise makes you breathe harder and your heart beat faster. One of the best ways to get enough aerobic exercise is to walk briskly on a regular basis.

Brisk walking provides moderate-intensity aerobic exercise if you take 100 steps or more per minute. You'll get the most health benefits if you walk briskly for 30 minutes or more at least 5 days a week, a study published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* found. But brisk walking has benefits even if you do it for 10 minutes. So if you're not used to walking briskly, start by trying to walk 1,000 steps in 10 minutes and work up to 3,000 steps in 30 minutes.

Here are some ways to get the health benefits of walking:

Track your walking on a daily basis. Keep a record of how many minutes or how far you walk every day for a week, and note how many steps you take per minute or how long it takes to complete a mile. Or, record the number of steps you take every day for a week with a pedometer, a health app, or a wearable activity-tracker. If you use an app or device that tracks only how many steps you take and not how long you walk, check the time on your watch or phone at the beginning and end of your walk. Divide the number of steps you took by the number of minutes to see your pace. For example, if you took 1,500 steps in 15 minutes, you walked 100 steps per minute (1,500 divided by 15 = 100). You might record your walking habits in the space provided at the end of this article.

Set walking goals for yourself. Start with a vision of what you hope to accomplish in a certain number of weeks or months and gradually work up to it by setting specific, measurable goals. For example, your first goal might be to walk for 10 minutes a day for the first week at your usual speed. Then try to increase your speed in the second week. If you take 60 steps per minute in the first week, try to take 70 the next week until you work up to 100. Or increase the amount of time you walk, so that you walk 10 minutes a day during the first week and 15 during the second.

Build your endurance. You can build your endurance gradually over several weeks by increasing your walking sessions by 5 minutes each time. For example, if you typically walk 15 minutes a day two times a week, you might commit yourself to walking more by walking 20 minutes three times a week and then working up to 30 minutes five times a week.

Increase your distance. Gradually increase the number of steps you walk. If you started with about 4,000 steps a day, increase your steps by 500 or 1,000 steps a day. Over the course of several weeks, keep increasing the number of steps you walk until you reach your goal. Ideally 10,000 steps, studies have shown, provide many health benefits.

Step up your pace. Try walking more briskly after you've worked up to your target number of steps per day. Fast walkers get more benefits than those who amble, such as window shoppers, research has found. Slow walkers—those who walk a mile in 24 minutes or more—have a higher death rate than those who walk at a quicker pace, according to the National Walkers' Health Study, a large national database maintained at the University of California at Berkeley.

Walking safely

Talk with your health care provider before you start an exercise routine.

Wear comfortable shoes and good, clean socks when you walk. Always make sure that you walk in supportive shoes, such as walking shoes or other athletic shoes or sneakers that are appropriate for walking. Keep your shoes and socks in top shape. Don't walk in high heels, dress shoes, or flip-flops, which don't provide enough support for your feet.

Drink plenty of water throughout the day.

Warm up for 5 minutes when you start your walk. Stroll or walk at a slower pace to warm up.

After 5 minutes, work up to your target pace.

Cool down for 5 minutes at the end of your walk and then do some stretching. At the end of your walk, continue walking at a slower rate for 5 minutes rather than abruptly stopping so that your body cools down. Stretch your legs and arms. Be sure to stretch slowly. Never bounce when you stretch or push yourself so hard that you feel discomfort or pain.

Always walk in a safe area and in safe situations. After dark, walk with a friend on a lighted track or walk indoors at the gym or the mall.

Be aware of the physical conditions around you. Watch for physical hazards, such as uneven pavements, curbs and potholes to avoid injury. Remember that rain and snow can create slippery conditions, and hide potholes and uneven surfaces.

Wear light clothing and reflectors or reflective clothing if you are walking before sunrise or at nighttime. Carry a pocket-sized flashlight or use the light on your mobile device if needed.

Always carry some form of identification when you walk. If needed, you can use a sports wallet or pocket for this purpose.

Ten ways to walk more

Here are 10 ways to fit more walking into your life:

1. **Plan walks with family and friends.** Plan to walk with a friend at the beginning of the day or with a family member or your partner at the end of the day.
2. **When you are walking indoors on a treadmill,** listen to music or an audio book to keep your walk interesting.
3. **Walk at work and when you're running errands.** Park further away at the supermarket. Avoid elevators and escalators. Take the stairs whenever you can. Walk a few laps on the floor during breaks or go outside and walk around the block. Walk to a co-worker's space rather than calling or sending an email. Consider having some "walking meetings" at work. Walk to your neighbor or friend's house instead of calling.
4. **Be active during children's sporting events.** Take a walk while your kids are playing or practicing sports. Instead of sitting down, walk up and down the sidelines. Or get out of the car and walk up and down in front of the school when you're waiting to pick your child up at the end of the day.
5. **Walk at the airport while waiting for your flight.**
6. **Plan active vacations.**
7. **Walk on your lunch break.** Go out for a 20-minute break at lunchtime.
8. **Join a walking group or club.** Start one at work or with friends.
9. **Walk your dog or your neighbor's dog.**
10. **Limit television viewing to no more than one hour a day.** This leaves more time for physical activities like walking.

Use a chart like the one attached to track the number of minutes or steps you walk, as well as your intensity (steps per minute).



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