

Walking Your Way to Fitness

by

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Introduction – Walking Is a Simple and Powerful Way to Get In Shape

You walk every day. You walk to your car, you walk to your kitchen and maybe you walk your dog. It's as natural as eating or sleeping, and you've probably been walking for a few decades. So it might surprise you to learn that this fundamental way of moving around is actually quite good for your health and wellbeing.

There are an abundance of mental, physical, and emotional benefits to walking. In fact, walking has been shown to improve sleep, treat depression, and to reverse chronic health conditions like type II diabetes.

10,000 steps and beyond

It takes around ten minutes to walk 1000 steps. Doctors recommend about 10,000 steps a day, which is the equivalent of about 100 minutes of exercise. Once you've achieved the 10,000 steps a day, you can increase the intensity, steps, and other exercises into your day so that you continue improving your health and fitness.

The great thing about walking

What's uniquely wonderful about walking is that most everyone can do it. You don't need any special skills to walk. Fancy and expensive equipment isn't required. You can be in terrible health or good health and walk. People all ages and abilities can benefit from walking. You don't even have to go outside to walk. A simple walking treadmill can help you exercise while you work, watch television, or keep an eye on young children.

All at once or in small bites

Walking is also a fitness activity that can be enjoyed on a schedule that fits your needs. For example, if you have time to go for an hour long walk in the morning, great. If you don't have time for that, you can break your walks up into ten or fifteen minute increments. Take a short walk in the morning, at lunch, and in the early evening.

Because it's an easy activity to engage in that doesn't require a trip to the gym or specialty equipment, you can fit it into your life more easily. And let's face it - it's a lot easier to talk yourself into taking a walk than it might be to head to the gym.

The health benefits will motivate you to start walking...

The mental and emotional benefits will keep you motivated. Walking benefits your mind, body, and emotions. After a week or so, you'll be hooked. Let's start by talking about the amazing health benefits that walking delivers.

Five Benefits of Walking

There are actually dozens of benefits of walking and you'll experience many of them for yourself when you begin your walking for fitness program. However, there are some life-changing benefits that are worth pointing out.

1. Walking reduces your risk for coronary heart disease

You might be surprised to learn that 50% of all deaths in the United States are directly related to heart disease. It's the single biggest killer. The good news is that regular physical activity, like walking, helps reduce your risk of developing heart disease. Additionally, it can help you recover from a heart attack or heart surgery and reduce your risk of suffering another heart attack.

2. Walking reduces high blood pressure

High blood pressure has been called the silent killer. When you have high blood pressure, your heart has to work harder to pump blood through your arteries. This causes it to enlarge which then puts you at risk for heart attacks, stroke, and heart failure.

When you walk at a heart-pumping pace, you actually increase blood flow so that your muscle cells get the oxygen that they need. After exercise, your blood pressure will be a bit lower than when you started. This effect can last for a while. Additionally, walking and exercise help clear up the things that cause high blood pressure, thus reducing your blood pressure and helping to bring it down to more normal levels.

3. Walking improves your blood lipid profile, aka cholesterol

There are two types of cholesterol in your body: HDL (high density lipoprotein) and LDL (low density lipoprotein). They're both needed to build and repair the walls of your cells. However, too much LDL, which is often called "bad" cholesterol, can raise your risk of heart disease and stroke. In contrast, HDL is often called "good" cholesterol and is also used to help remove fats from your bloodstream. If you don't have enough HDL, you end up with clogged arteries.

Walking and regular exercise help increase HDL and lower LDL. A healthy diet in combination with daily vigorous walking boosts the results.

4. Walking helps you lose weight and keep it off

Obesity is one of the biggest contributors to disease. It causes cancer, heart disease, diabetes and more. And let's face it, extra weight just isn't comfortable. Our lives are too sedentary. We sit too much. Your body was meant to move. And it doesn't have to move in superstar athletic, seemingly superhuman ways.

You don't have to do CrossFit, ride your bike across the country, or swim the English Channel to get fit. You can walk like you were born to. As you walk, you'll begin to modify your metabolism. You'll burn more calories during the day. You'll also burn calories as you walk.

Walk faster, burn more. Walk longer, burn more. A lifelong walking for fitness program will help you lose weight and keep it off.

5. Walking reduces your risk of type II diabetes

Walking helps you balance your blood sugar by getting your muscles burning the sugars. It increases the number of insulin receptors in your cells which in turn helps move the blood sugar into your cells rather than lingering in your blood and making you insulin resistant. And if you want to boost the effects, walk after eating. It helps improve blood glucose control and burns more fat and calories.

These are the five most talked about benefits of walking. There are more. Let's take a look at them next because the benefits just keep coming.

Five More Benefits of Walking

When you create a daily walking habit, you're going to be surprised just how much of an impact it has on your life. We're talking about both physical and mental improvements. You'll feel better inside and out. Let's take a look at some of these life-changing benefits of walking.

1. Enhanced mental wellbeing

Exercise reduces stress. It's been proven time and time again through numerous studies. In fact, the National Institute of Mental Health concluded that exercise relieves muscle tension, improves hormone regulation, and has a beneficial impact on how your body responds to stress. Something as simple as a daily 30-minute walk at a brisk pace can reduce stress-related emotions including anger, depression, tension, sadness, anxiety and more.

Exercise including walking is often prescribed by both physicians and psychiatrists as a way to manage and reduce the effects of stress and depression. For people with moderate depression, daily exercise can significantly reduce symptoms and for those with severe depression, walking and exercise are part of a management plan.

But you don't have to be stressed, depressed, or anxious to benefit from the mental benefits. Walking can induce a state of calm. It helps you feel centered and gives you some perspective on your day and your life.

It gets your heart pumping, which drives oxygen to your tissues including your brain. This in turn helps release endorphins that are known to help create a state of calmness and general wellbeing. If you want to find a way to increase your happiness, try going for a walk every day.

2. More energy and better sleep

Would you like to sleep better? Would you like to have more energy during the day? Walking can improve both. It can help you have more even energy levels during the daytime and help you sleep better at night.

As your heart rate increases, it requires your muscles to use more energy. This in turn has the effect of boosting your metabolism and helping to balance your blood sugar levels. After a brisk walk you'll feel energized for hours as your metabolism continues to hum along. And because you're requiring your body to perform extra work, it needs to shut down and repair at night. Your mind won't race as you try to fall asleep. Your body's needs will take over and you'll sleep more soundly.

3. Improved sex life

According to a study of women aged 45-55, those that exercised and engaged in a walking for fitness program experienced an increase in libido and improved sexual satisfaction. That's enough to get you in those walking shoes and out the door, right?

4. Improved self-esteem

A walking for fitness program will help you enjoy life more and feel more positive about yourself. Not only are you taking decisive action to control your life and your health, you'll also start feeling a sense of accomplishment and pride. As your energy improves and you begin to lose weight, your self-esteem will increase too.

5. Improved mobility

When you walk, particularly on uneven surfaces like trails, your body is required to balance and adapt. This helps strengthen your bones, muscles, and tendons and ligaments. The result is improved mobility and a reduced risk of falls as you get older.

You won't have this benefit walking on a treadmill because it's an even surface. However, you still increase your mobility a bit by moving your body and avoiding a sedentary lifestyle. When you sit and don't move your muscles, they shorten. This reduces your ability to move comfortably. Exercises like walking help restore natural movement.

Okay, so you're motivated to start a walking for fitness program. The benefits are fresh in your mind and you know that it's as easy as putting on your shoes and walking. Let's talk about those shoes next. While you can walk in anything, including your bare feet, walking shoes can help provide the support and comfort you need to reach your walking for fitness goals.

Choosing the Best Walking Shoes

Good walking shoes have a few things in common. They're comfortable. They provide enough cushioning for your foot's particular needs. They don't rub or cause blisters and they're in your budget. Walking shoes should support you to reach your walking goals, whether your goal is to walk your 10,000 daily steps or to compete in a race walking event. Let's take a look at some of the features to compare when shopping for walking shoes.

The toe box

The toe box is the portion of the shoe that surrounds your toes and the front part of your foot. Your toe box should be wide enough that your toes don't touch the ends of the shoes and the sides of the shoe don't rub. Too much space and you may find that your foot doesn't have the stability it needs. Your foot will slip around. Too little space and you'll get hot spots and blisters.

The arch support

Depending on the height of your arch, you may need more or less arch support. Take a look at the bottom of the pair of shoes you wear most often. Where is the shoe worn? Is it worn on the inside of your foot? The outside? If it's worn down on the inside, you may need more arch support - on the outside and you may need less.

Cushioning

If you have joint issues or some weight to lose, then consider shoes with more cushioning. This will reduce the impact of each step. You'll be able to walk longer and faster without experiencing achy joints. Keep in mind that when you walk, your heel strikes the ground first. Good heel cushioning can make a significant difference.

Weight

Shoes can be extremely heavy. The lighter the shoe, the less additional weight you'll have to move with each step. Of course, the more cushioning you have, the heavier the shoe will be. And lighter shoes tend to be more expensive.

Shop around

Consider heading to a walking or running shoe store. A shoe fitting expert can watch you walk on a treadmill and give you an idea of how your foot strikes and what type of shoe may fit best. If that's not an available option, try on a lot of shoes.

Walk around the store in them and get a sense for how they feel. Look for rubbing and pay attention to how your foot hits the ground when you walk. If you feel your foot rolling to the inside or outside, then there may be some stability issues with the shoe.

Good walking shoes can be expensive but they don't have to be. Buying last year's model is one way to save money. Keep in mind that walking shoes wear out. You'll replace them about every 500-600 miles. If you're walking five or more miles a day, that's a new pair of shoes every 100 days. Finding a good pair of shoes can make a big difference in your walking program. Spend some time searching for the pair that's right for you.

If you're walking outside, you're going to wear those shoes down more quickly than if you're walking indoors. Walking outside has benefits but it brings some safety issues with it as well. In the next section we take a look at how to be safe when walking outdoors.

Walking for Fitness Safety Gear

Between traffic, criminals, and animals, walking outside can be a challenge. This is particularly true if you walk when it's still dark outside. If you're walking before or after work then this is a very real possibility. Let's take a look at some gear and tips to help you stay safe whenever you walk.

Light it up

If you're walking before the sun is fully up or as it's setting, then it's essential to make sure that drivers, cyclists, and other people can see you. Wear reflective clothing. They make walking vests that are reflective. You can buy reflective belts and even straps to wrap around your legs and arms. Consider also wearing a headlamp if it's dark outside so you can see where you're walking.

Have a plan and share it

Make sure that someone knows where you're walking and how long you'll be gone. This way, should you have an emergency, you can be found. Additionally, consider getting a Road ID-type identification bracelet. These have your emergency information including an emergency contact printed on them. If you're walking at night, try to find a partner to walk with.

Mace and protection

While it's not advisable to put yourself in a position where you'll need mace or pepper spray, it's a good idea to carry it. It can be used on human and animal predators. Pepper spray in the face of a mugger or an aggressive dog can save your life.

Walk in the right direction

If you are walking in the road, make sure that you're facing traffic. Also make sure that when you cross the street, you use a crosswalk whenever possible. There are laws governing walking in traffic. Follow them to help keep you safe. Additionally, if you're walking on a path or sidewalk, stay to the right of the path. Pass others on the left and then get back over to the right. Share the sidewalk.

Finally, while it's nice to be able to listen to music while you're walking, it can also be dangerous. You cannot hear the people, bikes, and cars around you. If you simply must walk to music, make sure that you keep the volume low so that you can hear what's going on around you.

Safety is important. So too is good walking form. Proper form can help reduce your risk of injuries, help you burn more calories, and recover more quickly from your walks.

Walking Tips – How to Walk with Proper Form

Walking is easy, right? You just put one foot in front of the other. While that's true, over time your body can start to change the way you walk. For example, if you have one foot that has a lower arch than the other, you might begin to walk with an irregular gait to compensate. Tight shoulders also affect how your arms swing. When you learn to walk with proper form, you begin strengthening your body from head to toe and you won't have aches and pains.

Let's start at the top...

Your head and neck position

Stand tall and feel how your body is stacked. Your head is positioned above your neck, which is the top of your spine and extends down through your core to your hips. Standing, you should ideally be able to draw a straight line from your ear down to your shoulder, to your hip, knee and ankle. Most people tend to have a head that juts forward a bit, shoulders that round forward, or hips that tip. Posture is something that can be improved over time. Become aware of your posture. Walk with your chin parallel to the ground, looking straight ahead of you. Look about twenty feet ahead of you.

Arms and shoulders

Work to relax your shoulders. Swing your arms naturally with your arms bent at about a 90 degree angle. Your hands should be relaxed too. If you find yourself clenching your fists, try to shake your hands out and relax a bit.

Swinging your arms as you walk helps you walk faster and it burns more calories. Your arms should swing naturally and be about waist level. Swinging your arms also helps prevent your hands from tingling or going numb which can happen on long walks if your arms hang at your sides.

Your stride

When your feet hit the ground you should hit heel first and roll toward your toes. Your heel strike should be gentle to avoid a harsh impact. Your stride length should feel natural and your knees should stay soft. It's better to take shorter strides and walk faster than to take long strides. Long strides can put an unnatural force on your joints.

Before you head out for a walk, consider taking some time to stretch your muscles and get your body ready for a bit of exertion. We'll talk about stretching before and after your walks in the next section.

Stretching Before and After Your Walks

There are actually many myths about stretching and exercise. It used to be believed that you should spend a good five to ten minutes stretching before you worked out. The truth is that while it is important to get your muscles limber and ready for exercise, it's better to focus on warming them up rather than stretching.

Before your walk

Before your walk, spend a few minutes warming up your muscles. The simplest way to do this is to start your walk off at a slow pace. Walk for about five minutes or so and gradually increase the pace until you're at your fitness walking pace. You might also walk or march in place, jump lightly, or perform a few slow squats.

Leg swings can help your hips warm up and get ready for exercise, too. Hold on to a stable chair and swing the opposite leg in front and behind you. Turn around and swing the other leg. Swing each leg about ten times.

If you like to stretch before you walk, don't hold the stretches. If you have a tendency for stiff shoulders, consider doing arm swings and rotations. Swing your arms in forward circles ten times, then reverse the direction and do ten more arm circles. After that, swing your arms across your chest alternating which arm crosses over the top.

After your walk

After your walk, take time to cool down. Gradually slow your pace and let your muscles begin to relax. You'll feel your heart rate come back to normal and your breathing should relax too. This is the time to stretch and hold the stretches. Calf stretches, toe touches, and stretching your quads all help your muscles stay limber.

We've talked a bit about how to warm up and cool down from a walk, but we haven't talked about how far to walk, how fast or how long you might want to walk each day. In the next section we'll talk about recommendations for a walking program.

Walking for Fitness - How Long, How Fast, and How Far?

In the beginning, as you first start your walking for fitness program it's important to simply start walking. How far, fast, and long doesn't really matter. What's important is that you're creating a habit of walking every day. However, that isn't going to last forever. At some point you're going to want to take it up a notch. Let's talk about different goals and how to reach them.

- 10,000 steps a day – This equates to about five miles each day and as mentioned earlier it takes about ten minutes to walk 1000 steps. This means that you'll need to walk about an hour and a half each day. You can increase your pace, and shorten the time it takes you to walk your 10,000 steps.
- More steps in less time - The faster you walk, the higher your heart rate. As your heart rate increases, you burn more calories. So your goal can transition from 10,000 steps a day in 100 minutes to perhaps 10,000 steps in 70-80 minutes. Try to reduce your time by a minute each week.
- Increased heart rate for weight loss – Another approach is to simply try to make sure your heart rate is at a fat-burning pace for 30 minutes a day. A fat-burning pace is about 60-70 percent of your maximum heart rate. You'll need to wear a heart rate monitor for this approach. One way to estimate your maximum heart rate is to subtract your age from 220. For example if you're 40 then your maximum heart rate would be 180. 65 percent of 180 is 117. So you'd want to keep your heart rate around 117 for 30 minutes to burn fat.

How long, how far and how fast you walk depends on your goals. You might try to get all of your fitness walking accomplished in one outing or you might break it up into a few shorter walks. Gradually increase your time, distance, and pace as you get more comfortable with walking and your fitness improves.

We mentioned the heart rate monitor. That's just one of many walking for fitness gadgets and tools you might benefit from. In the next section we'll take a look at fitness walking technology.

Gadgets for Walking

There are a number of fitness tracking devices that can help you reach your walking goals. They can track your steps, distance, pace, heart rate and more. Finding the right device can help you stay on track to achieve your goals. As they say, knowledge is power. Let's take a look at a few different goals and the devices that can help you reach them.

- Pedometers - Over the past few years, fitness gadgets have gone to a whole new level. Pedometers used to only track steps. Now devices like the Fitbit track intensity, calories burned and they even track how well you sleep. Pedometers don't have to be fancy or expensive. You can get a simple pedometer for just a few dollars. If you're walking to a goal of 10,000 steps then you can't do without a pedometer.
- Heart rate monitors – If your goal is to improve your cardiovascular health or to lose weight by getting your heart rate into the fat-burning zone, then a heart rate monitor makes it easier. You can learn to take your pulse and calculate your heart rate.
- However, sometimes you just want to walk and be able to look at the numbers. Heart rate monitors usually come as two parts. One part is a chest strap that you fasten around your chest. It senses electrical impulses from your heart. The other part is a watch that displays your information.
- GPS devices – GPS devices use satellite information to help track your distance, pace, and time. This is great if your goal is to attain a specific pace. For example, if you want to walk four miles per hour then a GPS device can tell you how you're doing.

There are also combination devices to consider. Some display distance, pace, and time and are also a music player. There are devices that integrate with your phone, with an online membership service, and with your television or computer. There are even walking games that you can get for your gaming console.

Determine what your goals are and how technology can help you measure and track your goals. If you want to listen to music while you walk, you might look for a combination device that supports all of your needs. Be aware that these gadgets can be expensive. Be sure to read reviews and make sure a technology is right for you.

Creating Your Walking Program

With shoes, technology and a goal you're ready to get started with your walking for fitness program. Before you head out the door, though, it's important to consider your existing fitness level. Your current state of health should play a role in creating your walking for fitness program.

Measuring your fitness

One method to evaluate where you are right now in terms of your walking fitness is to walk a mile. Get to the point where your pace has you breathing heavily but you're still able to talk. You shouldn't feel strained. Look at the time when you're done. That is your baseline. When you're walking for fitness and creating your daily and weekly goals, that mile pace is something to aim for.

If you don't feel ready to walk a mile at a fast pace, then start your walking program by measuring your daily steps. Most people get around 3000 to 4000 steps a day. Track your steps for a few days and then create a plan to increase your steps each day. Try to increase by at least 100 steps a day.

Small steps reap large rewards

It's a good idea to create a walking program that gradually increases over time. Don't try to accomplish too much right away. Walking for fitness is a habit you're trying to add to your life. If you aim too high, the new habit may feel too overwhelming.

Small steps help you build a pattern of success. They allow your body and your lifestyle the time you need to adapt to your new fitness walking program. As you successfully reach your daily, weekly, and monthly goals, you'll feel more confident and in control. What's a reasonable goal to set? Here are a few examples:

- 100 more steps each day
- Increase your pace by ten seconds per mile each week
- Add five minutes each week to your walking time

All three of those goals probably look manageable. That's the best way to approach a new fitness program. Before long you'll be walking 10,000 or more steps each day, clipping away at a four miles per hour pace and walking for an hour and a half or more.

Walking is great for your mental and physical health. It's easy to do, fun to do and it takes very little to get started.

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