Walking For Health And Fitness

HEALTH ACTION GUIDE

You have been doing it ever since you can remember. You probably don't even have to think about it. Yet, it may be your key to lifelong health. What are we talking about? Walking! This guide provides the steps to a safe and effective walking plan.

QUICK QUIZ

Although many of us take walking for granted, when you begin a walking program specifically to improve your health and fitness, it's good to start off on the right foot. Get the facts by answering these three questions, true or false:

1. You burn more calories walking a mile at a moderately fast pace than walking a mile at a slower pace.	☐ True ☐ False
2. Drinking cool water instead of a sports drink is the best way to replace fluids after walking for an hour or less.	☐ True ☐ False
3. Once you have become accustomed to walking on a regular basis, you don't need to warm up or cool-down.	☐ True ☐ False

QUICK FACTS

1. False—You burn the same calories when you walk a mile no matter what speed—it only takes you longer to cover the mile when you walk at a slower pace. The average person burns about 100 calories per mile. Even a slow walk helps an inactive person get started!
2. True—Some ads claim their product is what you need after a workout. However, the preferred way to replace fluids after a walking workout that lasts an hour or less is to drink cool water. Drink some water before you go for your walk and depending on the weather, how long you plan to walk, and how much you sweat, you might want to bring a water bottle along with you to stay hydrated.
3. False—Warm-up and cool-down periods are a must in your walking program no matter how fit or comfortable you are with your routine. A warm-up allows your heart rate to slowly increase and prepares your muscles for activity. A cool-down lowers your heart rate safely. The cool-down is also a good time to stretch.

A Note About Safety

Walking is generally safe for everyone. However, if you haven't been physically active in a while, start slowly and gradually build up. Don't do vigorous exercise at first. If you have any of the following conditions, please talk with your physician before increasing physical activity:

- diabetes
- any disease of the heart or lungs
- high blood pressure
- any history of chest pain
- breathing problems or shortness of breath
- dizziness
- swelling in your ankles
- bone or joint problems
- unusual fatigue
- pregnancy

Stay in touch with your doctor about your exercise program and your health. Do not engage in exercise activities if you have a health condition that is unstable or serious, you have new symptoms, or your doctor recommends against it.

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FIVE STEPS TO A PERSONAL WALKING PLAN

STEP ONE: Gear Up For Walking

One good thing about walking is that you don't need a lot of special equipment or clothes. For your safety and comfort, however, consider having the following items:

- **A good pair of walking shoes.** Look for a well-fitting shoe with a leather or nylon upper to let your feet breathe, plenty of toe room, laces for a snug fit, good arch support, a padded heel with good support, and a flexible sole. Be sure to replace your shoes approximately every 300-400 miles, even if they look fine on the outside. For example, if you walk/ run about 15 miles per week, you should replace your shoes every 5-6 months.
- **A pair of good sport socks.** Look for socks or sock liners made of synthetic wicking material that moves moisture away from your feet to help keep them dry and prevent blisters. Remember to wear these socks when you try on new walking shoes to ensure a good fit.
- **A charged cell phone and identification** for emergencies.
- **A water bottle** to carry with you to replace fluids when it's hot or on long walks.
- **Light-colored clothing or reflectors** so drivers can see you when you walk in poor light.
- **Weather appropriate gear**—if it's cold or wet, layer your clothing so you can peel off layers as you warm up; if it's a sunny day, apply sunscreen and/or wear sunglasses, a hat and protective clothing.
- **MP3 player**—listening to music can make your walk more enjoyable, but if you wear headphones, keep the volume at a level that allows you to hear outside noises.

STEP TWO: Exercise Guidelines—How Much and How Hard?

As you're putting together your walking program, here is what the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services encourages healthy adults to aim for:

- At least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity cardio (aerobic) physical activity each week, or
- At least 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity cardio (aerobic) physical activity each week, or
- An equivalent combination of moderate- and vigorous-intensity cardio (aerobic) physical activity

Walking typically falls into the moderate-intensity category, but it can become vigorous exercise at times, such as when walking up hills or race-walking. See the box on the next page for specifics about intensity.

There are many ways you can "mix-and-match" your walking plan to meet the guidelines. A typical option is to do 30 minutes of brisk walking five days a week. Another option is to go for a 50-minute brisk walk three days a week. With either option, at the end of the week, you will have accumulated 150 minutes of moderate-intensity cardio activity. It's best to spread your activity throughout the week. In other words, don't plan to go for a 2½ hour walk on Saturday and then be inactive the other six days of the week.

As long as you do activities for at least 10 minutes at a time, you can accumulate your time over multiple sessions in a day. So, for example, you can squeeze in a brisk 10-minute walk at lunchtime, in the late afternoon and then again in the evening.

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Moderate-intensity activities are generally equal to a brisk walk that noticeably increases the heart rate. It's easy to estimate your intensity using a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is sitting and 10 is the highest level of effort possible. During an activity, simply ask yourself how much effort you are expending. Moderate-intensity physical activity will feel like a 5 or 6 on the scale of 0 to 10. You can also use the "talk test", which means that during moderate-intensity activity, you can talk, but not sing the words to your favorite song.

Vigorous-intensity activities are generally equal to running and cause rapid breathing and a substantial increase in heart rate. The effort level required to perform vigorous-intensity physical activity is usually a 7 or 8 on a scale of 0 to 10. During vigorous-intensity exercise, you won't be able to say more than a few words without pausing for a breath.

STEP THREE: Walking Options

Ask yourself these questions as you're creating your walking plan:

1. **What are the best times of the day for me to walk? Why?**

   _____

2. **What are the best days of the week for me to walk? Why?**

   _____

3. **On those best days, how long of a block of time is realistic for me to walk?**

   During the week: _____

   Weekends: _____

4. **Where can I walk?**

   _____

5. **Do I want to invite someone else to walk with me? If yes, who?**

   _____

Walk THIS Way

Believe it or not, how you walk makes a difference. That's because the way you stride and the way your arms swing have an effect on your heart rate and exercise intensity.

What's the right stride for you? Try this:

Stand with your feet together and slowly lean forward at your ankles without bending your waist. As you begin to fall forward, catch yourself by putting one foot forward. Look down at the distance between your two feet—this is your stride. Remember, your stride should feel comfortable and natural—baby steps or giant steps can tire you out too quickly.

Arm movement can make fitness walking a total body workout. The harder you pump your arms, the more intensity you add. Don't let your arms hang loosely at your sides. Instead, swing them in a natural rhythm with your stride. To walk briskly (4 to 5 mph) you may have to concentrate on pumping your arms a little faster. Some people find it helps to bend their arms at the elbow. Keep your arms below the level of your head.

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STEP FOUR: The Full Package

A complete walking session includes:

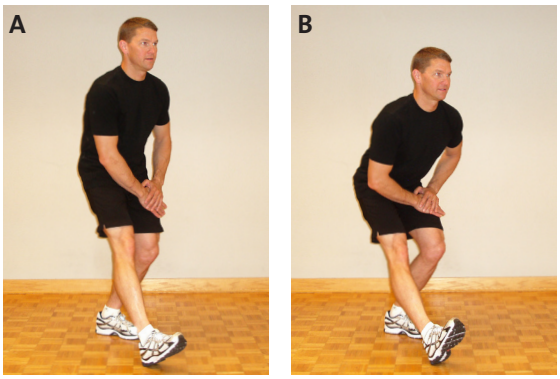
- A **WARM-UP** for five to 10 minutes, during which you walk at a relaxed pace to get your muscles warm and loose and your body systems prepared for exercise.
- A **BRISK WALK** for at least 10 minutes or up to your target walking session time. Remember to assess your exercise intensity five to 10 minutes into your walk—does it feel like you are at a 5 or 6 on a scale of 0 to 10 in terms of effort?
- A **COOL-DOWN** for five to 10 minutes. After your brisk walk, let your arms relax at your sides and walk slowly for about five minutes before stopping completely. (This lets your heart return to its normal rate safely.)

Since your muscles are warm from exercising, this is a good time to stretch—especially your leg muscles. Hold each stretch for 10 to 30 seconds (no bouncing). Then, repeat each stretch two to four times, accumulating 60 seconds per stretch.

Standing Hamstring Stretch

A: Stand facing forward with back straight. Extend right leg forward. Place heel on the floor and point toes toward ceiling. Bend left knee slightly. Place hands on left thigh for support.

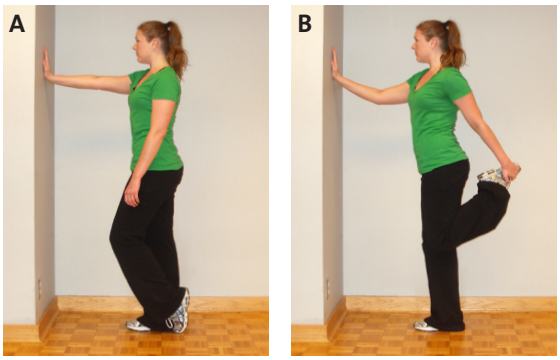
B: Keeping thighs aligned, bend at hips until you feel a comfortable stretch in the back of the extended right leg. Hold back straight and keep head aligned with spine. Hold stretch. Slowly round back and roll up to starting position Repeat on other side.



Quadricep Stretch

A: Stand with back straight and abdominal muscles tight to stabilize torso. Hold onto a wall (or tree) for balance, if needed.

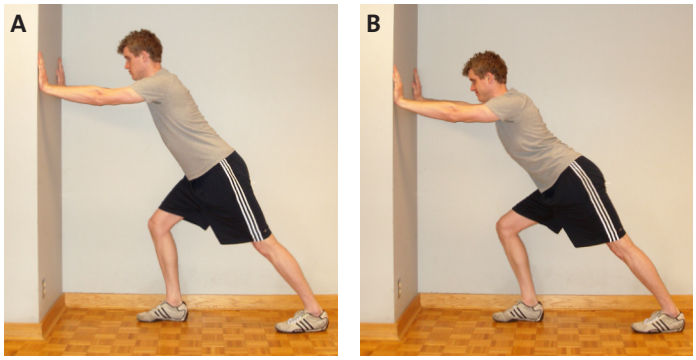
B: Bend one knee and bring foot toward your buttocks. Tuck buttocks under to yield a stretch in front of thigh. Hold stretch. Repeat on other side.



Calf Stretch

A: Bring right foot forward, keeping both heels down.

B: Slowly bend right knee until you feel a stretch in left calf. Hold stretch. Repeat on left side.



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As You Progress

As brisk walking becomes a regular habit, you may want to "spice up" your walking routine and add intervals of vigorous-intensity walking. For example, within a 45-minute walk, after walking for the first 15 minutes at your normal pace, add a 5-minute interval of very fast walking. You then return to your moderate pace for 10 minutes, followed by another 5-minute vigorous-intensity segment. See how it feels and monitor your body's response so you know when to back down. Intervals can add a nice "change of pace" to your walking program. And getting out of your comfort zone for brief periods adds benefits to your workout.

STEP FIVE: Ready, Set, Go!

It's time to pull it all together. Fill in the blanks below and you now have your own personal walking plan! Make copies and post your Monthly Walking Log on your refrigerator, desk, or somewhere visible so you can track your progress.

My Walking Plan

Are you ready to walk? Here's your checklist:

- ☐ I have appropriate walking shoes and socks
- ☐ I have read and understand the exercise guidelines
- ☐ I have identified the best days, times, and places to walk
- ☐ I have determined the realistic block(s) of time I can walk, including a warm-up and cool-down
- ☐ I have appropriate walking gear (e.g. cell phone, water bottle, hat, sunscreen, etc.)

My Walking Goal

Update this every few weeks to reflect gradual progress until you are at your target.

I will walk for _____ minutes at _____ (time or times) on _____ (day(s) of the week)

Monthly Walking Log

Enter the total # of minutes you walked at a moderate (or vigorous) intensity each day.

	Week of: _____	*Week of:* _____	*Week of:* _____	*Week of:* _____	*Notes*
Monday					
Tuesday					
Wednesday					
Thursday					
Friday					
Saturday					
Sunday					
Totals					

This information is intended for educational purposes only and should not be interpreted as medical advice. Please consult your doctor for advice about changes that may affect your health.

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