

A Harvard Health article

Walking: An Easy Way to Get Fit

How to reap the health benefits of walking



The next time you have a check-up, don't be surprised if your doctor hands you a prescription to walk. Yes, this familiar activity is now being touted (along with other forms of regular physical activity) as “the closest thing we have to a wonder drug.”

Walking can have a bigger impact on disease risk and various health conditions than just about any other remedy that's readily available to you. What's more, it's free and has practically no negative side effects. Walking for 2.5 hours a week—that's just 21 minutes a day—can cut your risk of heart disease by 30%. In addition, this do-anywhere, no-equipment-required activity has also been shown to reduce the risk of diabetes and cancer, lower blood pressure and cholesterol, and keep you mentally sharp. Even a quick one-minute jaunt pays off. A University of Utah study in 2014 found that for every minute of

brisk walking that women did throughout the day, they lowered their risk of obesity by 5%. No more “I don’t have time” excuses!

Walking: An ideal form of exercise

Have you ever resolved on New Year’s Day to start exercising more—only to find that you didn’t have the time or couldn’t afford expensive lessons, classes, or gym fees? Maybe concerns about injuries kept you on the sidelines. Walking could just be the way to keep your resolution. Here’s why:

- **You already know how to do it.** Just put one foot in front of the other. There’s no learning curve like you would have if you took up a new activity, such as Zumba or tennis.
- **You can do it anywhere.** Step out your front door. Take a walk from where you work. You can walk around areas that you frequent, such as the grocery store, a shopping center, a place of worship, or the homes of friends and family.
- **You don’t need any special equipment.** If you’re walking for exercise, it’s best to have a comfortable pair of shoes, preferably sneakers. But that’s it! While there are some items of clothing and gear that can make walking more enjoyable, they are not essential.
- **It’s gentle on your knees—and the rest of your body.** Unlike running, you keep one foot on the ground at all times when you’re walking, making it a low-impact, joint-friendly type of exercise.

Walking is not only healthy and easy, but it’s also fun

To some people, exercise feels like drudgery. With walking, however, you can pamper yourself in multiple ways.

- **You can do it with others.** Invite family, friends, or co-workers to join you for a walk. It’s a great way to catch up or get to know someone better. And if you need to have a tough conversation with someone, try doing it while walking. Striding side by side can make discussions easier because you’re more relaxed than when you’re sitting face to face.
- **You can get “me” time.** Heading out by yourself can be a good way to escape the demands and expectations that occupy much of your time. As you stroll, you can clear your head, relax, and reflect. It can be valuable, quiet “me” time, allowing you to return refreshed.

- **You can enjoy a dose of nature.** Studies show that spending time in parks or near water can boost your mood. Walking is a great way to get out in nature.
- **You can gain a new perspective.** The world is different when you view it at 3 mph instead of 25 or 30 mph. You might discover an interesting shop, observe intricate architecture, or meet a friendly person.
- **You can be more creative.** Stanford University researchers found that people generated twice as many creative responses to problems when walking compared with sitting. And the creative juices continued to flow even when they sat down after their walk—another good reason to take a walking break during the workday.

Starting a walking program

You've been walking for years. If you have kids, you helped them learn to do it. So what in the world don't you know about walking? When you start walking for health, you may find there are actually a lot of points you've never considered. Where do you walk, if your neighborhood doesn't have sidewalks?

Where to walk

The beauty of walking is that you can do it practically anywhere. Where you walk is a matter of personal preference and safety. Some people enjoy the fresh air and scenery of outdoor walking, while others prefer the climate control and safety of walking indoors on a treadmill or at a mall. Whatever your preference, don't get stuck in the rut of always walking in the same location.

No matter what your preference is, the most important thing is that you walk consistently.

Outdoor options:

- **Neighborhood.** Just step out your front door. You can't beat that for convenience. If it's not safe to walk near your home, consider walking in a neighborhood near your office or other locations that you frequent, like the grocery store or a family member's or friend's home.
- **Downtown.** If your community or a nearby one has a downtown area, explore it on foot. You can window-shop along the way or admire the architecture. Downtowns are a good place to walk because they usually have sidewalks and crosswalks to help keep you safe.
- **Open-air shopping complexes.** Similar to downtowns, these areas usually offer

sidewalks and crosswalks, and they are usually cleared if there's snow or ice.

- **Parks and trails.** Studies show that people walk more if they live near parks or trails. If a leisurely walk is what you're after, stick to level or gently rolling paths and avoid rocky terrain. Want to go for a speed walk? Paved or packed dirt paths are best. Trails with a steeper incline let you get a more vigorous trek without having to pick up your pace.
- **Tracks.** You can usually find these at schools, but some parks offer them as well.

Indoor options:

- **Malls.** While you could walk around a mall anytime it's open, arriving early, before the crowds, is the best way to get a good cardio workout. If your mall has multiple floors, take advantage of the stairs.
- **Your living room—or any other room in your house.** Simply stepping in place will burn calories—about 250 in an hour if you weigh 180 pounds. Try doing it while you watch your favorite TV show.
- **A gym or fitness center.** If a personal treadmill isn't an option, you might want to consider joining a fitness center to have access to a treadmill, especially during seasons when walking outdoors may be difficult in your area.

Types of walking

All walks are good for you. But there's more than one way to walk. Depending upon your goals, you may need to try a different type of walking. Here is an overview of different styles of walking and how each may benefit you.

- **Everyday walking.** This is ambling around your house or place of work, walking to and from your car, strolling around shopping, or any other incidental activities that require a little bit of walking.
- **Leisure walking.** Strolling while chatting with a friend or walking the dog are examples of leisure walking. When you're walking leisurely or strolling, you're relaxed and moving easily. Your effort is light enough that you'd be able to sing while you walked.
- **Fitness walking.** This type of walking is faster and more purposeful. Fitness walking can be done at a variety of levels, but basically it's a brisk pace. You should be breathing harder and your heart beating faster, but you should still be able to speak in complete sentences.
- **Interval walking.** For this type of walk, you alternate fast walking for short periods of

time with equal or longer intervals of slower or moderate-paced walking to recover.

- **Hiking.** This is simply walking in the woods or some other natural setting. As with other types of walking, there are different levels of difficulty—from level, well-groomed trails to steep, rocky routes marked with trail blazes that require more attention to ensure you stay on the right path.

Nordic walking

For this workout, you'll need a pair of Nordic (or fitness) walking poles. Follow the instructions that came with your poles to ensure that you have the proper height and that you are using them in the correct way. Use the rubber tip if you are walking on asphalt or concrete. The spike tip is for walking on grass or dirt.

Start by swinging your arms without gripping the poles as you walk. The poles will dangle from the straps on your wrists and drag along the ground. Your arms should be extended and swing naturally, coming up no higher than about waist height. As you become comfortable with this motion, lightly grasp the pole as it comes forward and press the pole tip down and back into the ground. As you extend your arm behind you, open your hand. The pole should always be pointing diagonally behind you. Don't plant the pole out in front of you, as you would if you were using poles during hiking to take pressure off your joints. You should always maintain a relaxed grip and use the straps to press down on the back swing. The more pressure, the more upper-body muscles you will activate.

Mindful walking

The goal of this type of walking is to reduce stress and be more present in the moment. By taking a "mindful" walk, you get the benefits of meditation without having to sit still. There are a variety of ways to do it, from simply walking with more awareness to following a more structured routine. Walking with awareness means paying more attention to your surroundings, your thoughts, or the physical sensations, such as the wind blowing against your face or your foot landing on the ground and rolling from your heel to your toes.

Unlike many other types of walking, the goal is not to go faster or get a better workout. The focus is on calming down, reducing stress, and relaxing.

Attending to the following points will help you taking a mindful walk:

- Start by bringing your attention to the sensations in your body.

- Breathe in smoothly through your nose, taking deep breaths. Feel your lungs expand from top to bottom rather than just at the top.
- Engage your senses fully. Notice each sight, touch, and sound so that you savor every sensation.

Try two variations while taking a mindful walk:

- An easy, leisurely stroll, breathing normally while paying attention to your inhalations and exhalations
- A moderate, purposeful walk. Match your breath to your steps for 4-8 steps while inhaling smoothly. Exhale smoothly for the same 4-8 steps.

By learning to focus on the here and now, you may find yourself less likely to get caught up in worries about the future or regrets over the past.

Adapted with permission from [Walking for Health](#), a special health report published by Harvard Health Publications.