

Q. I want to start walking for fitness – but I don't know where to start. Can you help me?



A. Walking is the most popular form of exercise for most people. It's easy, gentle on the body, doesn't require special skills, and provides excellent health benefits when done briskly and regularly.

Most people don't need to see their doctor before beginning a moderate exercise program such as walking. However, if you have health problems (such as heart disease, diabetes, etc.), or are at high risk for these problems, get specific directions from your doctor before beginning.

- **Aim for at least 30 minutes** of brisk walking daily.
- **Start at an easy pace.** Gradually increase time and distance as you get used to regular exercise. Don't over do it!
- **Moderate exercise should feel "fairly easy" to "somewhat hard."** It should make you breathe deeply, but not be out of breath. Working up a sweat is another sign of getting good health benefits.
- **Start each walk by going easy for a few minutes to warm up.** Then walk more briskly as your body adjusts. At the end of your walk, slow down gradually with easy walking or stretching to cool down.
- **Wear comfortable walking or jogging shoes when you exercise.** They cushion and support your feet for comfort. Use insoles if you need more support.
- **Drink plenty of water,** especially on hot days.
- **Wear loose-fitting, comfortable clothes** that breathe – shorts in summer, long pants in the winter, breathable water repellant gear for wet or snowy conditions.
- **Wear a digital sport watch** so you can time your walks and check your pulse if desired.
- **Find a walking companion.** It makes walking safer and is more fun. It also helps you exercise more regularly if you have a fitness buddy. It may be a spouse, your son or daughter, a friend, or your dog.
- **Record your exercise daily** on your calendar or other place where you will see it daily to remind you.

Q: What is power walking? And why do people pump their arms when they power walk?

A: Power walking is simply fast walking. You can walk faster if you bend your arms at the elbow. That's why power walkers hold their arms above the waist. Because your arms and legs coordinate, the faster you move (or pump) your arms, the faster you walk.

As you walk faster, you expend more energy, which greatly benefits your heart and cardiovascular system. Fast walking also stimulates metabolism and is more beneficial in preventing diabetes. It also stimulates the bones and helps them to be stronger, which decreases your risk of a hip fracture. Power walking is a good alternative to running, which is too vigorous or can put too much strain on the joints for many people.

Q: What length should my stride be when I'm trying to walk at a more intense pace?

A: Most people think that to walk fast, you have to take a big stride. It's true that lengthening your stride can improve your speed, but only up to a point. When you're trying to walk fast, it's more efficient to take shorter steps – but more of them. Race walkers, or power walkers, have learned that the best way to walk faster is to shorten their stride just a little, bend their arms at the elbow until their hands are above the waist, pump their arms vigorously as they walk, and take quicker steps. This usually involves more hip motion as they speed up.

In time, you can learn to walk quite fast, walking a mile in less than 15 minutes, or even in 12-13 minutes with practice. When walking intensely, focus on walking smoothly, not in a jerky manner. Also be careful not to overdo it. Walk quickly for just 20 seconds at first, alternating with an easier pace. Gradually increase your speed, allowing your legs, calves, and feet to adjust. Walking a 12-minute mile expends the same amount of energy as running a 10-minute mile. Walking, however, puts less strain on the joints and is less likely to cause an injury.

