

Walking: Trim your waistline, improve your health

Walking is a low-impact exercise with numerous health benefits. Here's how to get started.

By Mayo Clinic staff

Walking is a gentle, low-impact exercise that can ease you into a higher level of fitness and health. Walking is a form of exercise accessible to just about everybody. It's safe, simple and doesn't require practice. And the health benefits are many. Here's more about why walking is good for you, and how to get started with a walking program.

Benefits of walking

Walking, like other exercise, can help you achieve a number of important health benefits. Walking can help you:

- Lower low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol (the "bad" cholesterol)
- Raise high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol (the "good" cholesterol)
- Lower your blood pressure
- Reduce your risk of or manage type 2 diabetes
- Manage your weight
- Improve your mood
- Stay strong and fit

All it takes to reap these benefits is a routine of brisk walking. It doesn't get much simpler than that. And you can forget the "no pain, no gain" talk. Research shows that regular, brisk walking can reduce the risk of heart attack by the same amount as more vigorous exercise, such as jogging.

Preparation helps avoid injury

Walking isn't as likely to lead to injuries as other types of exercise. Still, take time to prepare yourself to prevent injuries, such as blisters or muscle pain.

Get the right gear

Be sure to wear comfortable footwear. Choose shoes with proper arch support, a firm heel and thick flexible soles to cushion your feet and absorb shock. Before you buy a new pair, be sure to walk in them in the store. Also dress in loose fitting, comfortable clothing and in layers if you need to adjust to changing temperature. If you walk outside, choose clothes appropriate for the weather. Avoid rubberized materials, as they don't allow perspiration to evaporate. Wear bright colors or reflective tape after dark so that motorists can see you.

Use proper technique

Walking is a great exercise because it's so simple to do. But using the correct posture and movements is essential.

Warm up

Spend about five minutes walking slowly to warm up your muscles. You can walk in place if you want. Increase your pace until you feel warm.

Stretch

After warming up, stretch your muscles before walking. Include the calf stretch, quadriceps stretch, hamstring stretch and side (iliotibial) stretch.

Cool down after each walking session

To reduce stress on your heart and muscles, end each walking session by walking slowly for about five minutes. Then, repeat your stretches.

Getting started: Focus on the basics

- **Start slow and easy.** If you're a seasoned walker, keep doing what you're doing. If you've been inactive and tire easily, it's best to start slow and easy. At first, walk only as far or as fast as you find comfortable. If you can walk for only a few minutes, let that be your starting point. For example, you might try short daily sessions of five to 10 minutes and slowly build up to 15 minutes twice a week. Then, over several weeks' time, you can gradually work your way up to 30 to 60 minutes of walking most days each week.
- **Measure the intensity of your workout.** As you walk, measure the intensity of your workout by checking your heart rate. Knowing your heart rate allows you to increase the intensity to maximize your workout or slow down to avoid overdoing it. To find out if you're exercising within the range of your target heart rate, stop walking to check your pulse manually at your wrist (radial artery) or neck (carotid artery). Another option is to wear an electronic device that displays your heart rate.

Set goals and track your progress

The good news is that walking — even only a modest amount — provides health benefits. For maximum benefits, work your way up to 30 to 60 minutes a day within your target heart rate zone, most days of the week. To achieve these benefits, it can help to set goals, track your progress and take steps to stay motivated.

Set realistic goals

If your goal is to walk two hours a day 365 days a year, you might be setting yourself up to fail. Set realistic goals for yourself, such as 30 minutes five days a week. And you don't need to do it all at once. Build walking into your schedule today. For example, walk for 10 minutes on your lunch break.

Track progress

Keeping a record of how many steps you take, the distance you walk and how long it takes can help you see where you started from and serve as a source of inspiration. Just think how good you'll feel when you see how many miles you've walked each week, month or year. Record these numbers in a walking journal you create for yourself or log them in a spreadsheet on your computer. Another option is to use an electronic device — such as a pedometer — to calculate time and distance for you.

Stay motivated

Starting a walking program takes initiative. Sticking with it takes commitment. But when you think of the potential health benefits, it's well worth your effort. Over time you'll likely feel more invigorated. To stay motivated:

- **Make it fun.** If you don't like walking alone, invite your spouse, partner, friend or neighbor to join you. You might also join a health club and use a treadmill.
- **Vary your routine.** Plan several different walking routes for variety. But if you're walking alone, be sure to tell someone which route you're taking.

Sometimes things happen to keep you from sticking to a regular walking program. Don't be too hard on yourself when this happens. You don't have to let a few days off sabotage your plan to reach a higher level of fitness and improved health. Just revisit your goals and get walking.

You'll be glad you started

Even though the first steps of any journey can be the most difficult, it helps to keep your goals foremost in your mind. So remember, once you take that first step, you're on the way to an important destination — better health!