

# Walking for Exercise and Pleasure

[The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports](#)

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## **Walking: An Exercise for All Ages**

Walking is easily the most popular form of exercise. Other activities generate more conversation and media coverage, but none of them approaches walking in number of participants. Approximately half of the 165 million American adults (18 years of age and older) claim they exercise regularly, and the number who walk for exercise is increasing every year.

Walking is the only exercise in which the rate of participation does not decline in the middle and later years. In a national survey, the highest percentage of regular walkers (39.4%) for any group was found among men 65 years of age and older.

Unlike tennis, running, skiing, and other activities that have gained great popularity fairly recently, walking has been widely practiced as a recreational and fitness activity throughout recorded history. Classical and early English literature seems to have been written largely by men who were prodigious walkers, and Emerson and Thoreau helped carry on the tradition in America. Among American presidents, the most famous walkers included Jefferson, Lincoln, and Truman.

Walking today is riding a wave of popularity that draws its strength from a rediscovery of walking's utility, pleasures, and health-giving qualities. This booklet is for those who want to join that movement.

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## **Walking: The Slower, Surer Way to Fitness**

People walk for many reasons: for pleasure ... to rid themselves of tensions ... to find solitude ... or to get from one place to another. Nearly everyone who walks regularly does so at least in part because of a conviction that it is good exercise.

Often dismissed in the past as being "too easy" to be taken seriously, walking recently has gained new respect as a means of improving physical fitness. Studies show that, when done briskly on a regular schedule, it can improve the body's ability to consume oxygen during exertion, lower the resting heart rate,

reduce blood pressure, and increase the efficiency of the heart and lungs. It also helps burn excess calories.

Since obesity and high blood pressure are among the leading risk factors for heart attack and stroke, walking often provides protection against two of our major killers.

Walking burns approximately the same amount of calories per mile as does running, a fact particularly appealing to those who find it difficult to sustain the jarring effects of long distance jogging. Brisk walking one mile in 15 minutes burns just about the same number of calories as jogging an equal distance in 8 1/2 minutes. In weight-bearing activities like walking, heavier individuals will burn more calories than lighter persons. For example, studies show that a 110-pound person burns about half as many calories as a 216-pound person walking at the same pace for the same distance.

Although increasing walking speed does not burn significantly more calories per mile, a more vigorous walking pace will produce more dramatic conditioning effects. When looking at the benefits to heart/lung endurance, how far one improves depends on his/her initial fitness level. Someone starting out in poor shape will benefit from a slow speed of walking whereby someone in better condition would need to walk faster and/or farther to improve. Recent studies show that there are also residual benefits to vigorous exercise. For a period of time after a dynamic workout, one's metabolism remains elevated above normal which results in additional calories burned.

In some weight-loss and conditioning studies, walking actually has proven to be more effective than running and other more highly-touted activities. That's because it's virtually injury-free and has the lowest dropout rate of any form of exercise.

Like other forms of exercise, walking appears to have a substantial psychological payoff. Beginning walkers almost invariably report that they feel better and sleep better, and that their mental outlook improves.

Walking also can exert a favorable influence on personal habits. For example, smokers who begin walking often cut down or quit. There are two reasons for this. One, it is difficult to exercise vigorously if you smoke, and two, better physical condition encourages a desire to improve other aspects of one's life.

In addition to the qualities it has in common with other activities, walking has several unique advantages. Some of these are:

*Almost everyone can do it.*

You don't have to take lessons to learn how to walk. Probably all you need to do to become a serious walker is step up your pace and distance and walk more often.

*You can do it almost anywhere.*

All you have to do to find a place to walk is step outside your door. Almost any sidewalk, street, road, trail, park, field, or shopping mall will do. The variety of settings available is one of the things that makes walking such a practical and pleasurable activity.

*You can do it almost anytime.*

You don't have to find a partner or get a team together to walk, so you can set your own schedule. Weather doesn't pose the same problems and uncertainties that it does in many sports. Walking is not a seasonal activity, and you can do it in extreme temperatures that would rule out other activities.

*It doesn't cost anything.*

You don't have to pay fees or join a private club to become a walker. The only equipment required is a sturdy, comfortable pair of shoes.

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## **Walking for Physical Fitness**

What makes a walk a workout? It's largely a matter of pace and distance. When you're walking for exercise, you don't saunter, stroll, or shuffle. Instead, you move out at a steady clip that is brisk enough to make your heart beat faster and cause you to breathe more deeply.

Here are some tips to help you develop an efficient walking style:

Hold head erect and keep back straight and abdomen flat. Toes should point straight ahead and arms should swing loosely at sides.

Land on the heel of the foot and roll forward to drive off the ball of the foot. Walking only on the ball of the foot, or in a flat-footed style, may cause fatigue and soreness.

Take long, easy strides, but don't strain for distance. When walking up or down hills, or at a very rapid pace, lean forward slightly.

Breathe deeply (with mouth open, if that is more comfortable).

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## **What to Wear When Walking**

A good pair of shoes is the only "special equipment" required by the walker. Any shoes that are comfortable, provide good support, and don't cause blisters or calluses will do, but here are some suggestions to help you make your selection:

- Good running shoes (the training models with heavy soles) are good walking shoes, as are some of the lighter trail and hiking boots and casual shoes with heavy rubber or crepe rubber soles.
- Whatever kind of shoe you select, it should have arch supports and should elevate the heel one-half to three-quarters of an inch above the sole of the foot.
- Choose a shoe with uppers made of materials that "breathe," such as leather or nylon mesh.

Weather will dictate the rest of your attire. As a general rule, you will want to wear lighter clothing than temperatures seem to indicate. Walking generates lots of body heat.

In cold weather, it's better to wear several layers of light clothing than one or two heavy layers. The extra layers help trap heat, and they are easy to shed if you get too warm. A wool watch cap or ski cap also will help trap body heat and provide protection for the head in very cold temperatures.

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## **Walking Poses Few Health Risks**

If you are free of serious health problems, you can start walking with confidence. Walking is not as strenuous as running, bicycling, or swimming and consequently involves almost no risk to health. Of course, this statement assumes that you will exercise good judgment and not try to exceed the limits of your condition.

Most physicians recommend annual physical examinations for persons over 40 or 45 years of age. Also, if you have high blood pressure or other cardiovascular problems, you should consult your physician before beginning any kind of exercise program.

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## **Warmup and Conditioning Exercises**

Walking is good exercise for the legs, heart, and lungs, but it is not a complete exercise program. Persons who limit themselves to walking tend to become stiff

and inflexible, with short, tight muscles in the back and backs of the legs. They also may lack muscle tone and strength in the trunk and upper body. These conditions can lead to poor posture and chronic lower-back pain, a problem that partially cripples or disables thousands of middle-aged and older Americans.

The exercises that follow are designed to increase flexibility and strength and to serve as a "warmup" for walking. Always do the exercises before walking.

**Stretcher** Stand facing wall arms' length away. Lean forward and place palms of hands flat against wall, slightly below shoulder height. Keep back straight, heels firmly on floor, and slowly bend elbows until forehead touches wall. Tuck hips toward wall and hold position for 20 seconds. *Repeat exercise with knees slightly flexed.*

**Reach and Bend** Stand erect with feet shoulder-width apart and arms extended over head. Reach as high as possible while keeping heels on floor and hold for 10 counts. Flex knees slightly and bend slowly at waist, touching floor between feet with fingers. Hold for 10 counts (If you can't touch the floor, try to touch the tops of your shoes.) *Repeat entire sequence 2 to 5 times.*

**Knee Pull** Lie flat on back with legs extended and arms at sides. Lock arms around legs just below knees and pull knees to chest, raising buttocks slightly off floor. Hold for 10 to 15 counts. (If you have knee problems, you may find it easier to lock arms behind knees.) *Repeat exercise 3 to 5 times.*

**Situp** Several versions of the sit-up are listed in reverse order of difficulty (easiest one listed first, most difficult one last). Start with the sit-up that you can do three times without undue strain. When you are able to do 10 repetitions of the exercise without great difficulty, move on to a more difficult version.

1. Lie flat on back with arms at sides, palms down, and knees slightly bent. Cud head forward until you can see past feet, hold for three counts, then lower to start position. *Repeat exercise 3 to 10 times.*
2. Lie flat on back with arms at sides, palms down, and knees slightly bent. Roll forward until upper body is at 45-degree angle to floor, then return to starting position. *Repeat exercise 3 to 10 times.*
3. Lie flat on back with arms at sides, palms down, and knees slightly bent. Roll forward to sitting position, then return to starting position. *Repeat exercise 3 to 10 times.*
4. Lie flat on back with arms crossed on chest and knees slightly bent. Roll forward to sitting position, then return to starting position. *Repeat exercise 3 to 10 times.*
5. Lie flat on back with hands laced in back of head and knees slightly bent. Roll forward to sitting position, then return to starting position. *Repeat exercise 3 to 15 times.*

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## **How Far? . . . How Fast? . . . How Soon?**

Now that you have decided to begin walking for exercise, you may be shocked at how poor your condition is. If at first you have difficulty in meeting the standards suggested here, don't be discouraged. You can systematically build your stamina and strength back to acceptable levels. Patience is the key to success. Some experts say that it takes a month of reconditioning to make up for each year of physical inactivity.

No one can tell you exactly how far or how fast to walk at the start, but you can determine the proper pace and distance by experimenting. We recommend that you begin by walking for 20 minutes at least four or five times a week at a pace that feels comfortable to you. If that proves to be too tiring, or too easy, reduce or lengthen your time accordingly.

Some very old people and some people who are ill begin by walking for one or two minutes, resting a minute, and repeating this cycle until they begin to be fatigued. Where you have to start isn't important; it's where you're going that counts.

As your condition improves, you should gradually increase your time and pace. After you have been walking for 20 minutes several days a week for one month, start walking 30 minutes per outing. Eventually, your goal should be to get to the place where you can comfortably walk three miles in 45 minutes, but there is no hurry about getting there.

The speed at which you walk is less important than the time you devote to it, although we recommend that you walk as briskly as your condition permits. It takes about 20 minutes for your body to begin realizing the "training effects" of sustained exercise.

The "talk test" can help you find the right pace. You should be able to carry on a conversation while walking. If you're too breathless to talk, you're going too fast.

The more often you walk, the faster you will improve. Three workouts a week are considered to be a "maintenance level" of exercise. More frequent workouts are required for swift improvement.

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## **Listen to Your Body**

Listen to your body when you walk. If you develop dizziness, pain, nausea, or any other unusual symptom, slow down or stop. If the problem persists, see your physician before walking again.

Don't try to compete with others when walking. Even individuals of similar age and build vary widely in their capacity for exercise. Your objective should be to steadily improve your own performance, not to walk farther or faster than someone else.

The most important thing is simply to set aside part of each day and walk. No matter what your age or condition, it's a practice that can make you healthier and happier.

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## **Let your legs take you down the road to fitness and vitality**

### **[Qualify for the Presidential Sports Award!](#)**

The Presidential Sports Award Program was developed by the President's Council on Physical Fitness & Sports in 1972 as a means to motivate all Americans to be active throughout life, and emphasizes regular exercise rather than outstanding performance. It is a non-profit program that runs entirely from participant fees and is administered by the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU). Click on the Presidential Sports Award link above to find out how to qualify.