

# Fit Facts

American  
Council on  
Exercise

## A WALK A DAY

**T**he popularity of walking as a fitness activity has grown by leaps and bounds. Low-risk and easy to start, walking has proven its health benefits in numerous studies.

An eight-year study of 13,000 people found that those who walked 30 minutes a day had a significantly lower risk of premature death than those who rarely exercised. In addition, research has shown that regular walking can decrease total and intra-abdominal fat and reduce your risk of developing diabetes or breast cancer.

A regular walking program can also:

- Improve your cholesterol profile
- Lower blood pressure
- Increase your energy and stamina
- Boost “couch potato” bone strength
- Prevent weight gain

Experts at the CDC and National Institute of Health recommend that every American adult engage in 30 minutes or more of moderate-intensity physical activity just about every day of the week. One way to meet this standard is to walk 2 miles briskly (about 4 miles/hr). If this is too fast, choose a more comfortable pace.

### Get ready

A walking program is simple to start. All you need are comfortable clothes and supportive shoes. Layer loose clothing, keeping in mind that brisk exercise elevates the body's temperature. Shoes specifically designed for walking or running are best. Make sure you have a little wiggle room between your longest toe (1/2") and the end of the shoe. Avoid cotton socks since they retain moisture and can promote blisters. To warm up, walk at an easy tempo for the first several minutes. Then gradually adopt a more purposeful pace.

### Get moving

- **Begin with short distances.** Start with a stroll that feels comfortable to you (perhaps 5-10 minutes) and gradually increase your time or distance each week by 10-20% (add just a few minutes or blocks). If it's easier on your joints and your schedule to take a couple shorter walks (10-20 minutes) instead of one long walk (30-40 minutes) each day, do it!
- **Focus on Posture.** Keep your head lifted, tummy pulled in and shoulders relaxed. Swing your arms naturally. Avoid carrying hand weights since these put excessive stress on the elbows and shoulders. Don't overstride. Select a comfortable, natural step length. If you want to move faster, pull your back leg through more quickly.
- **Breathe deeply.** If you can't converse or catch your breath while walking, slow down.



Initially, forget about walking speed. Just get out there on a regular basis and establish a habit of activity.

### Listen to your body.

If you experience foot, knee, hip or back pain when walking, STOP and check with your doctor to find out the cause. You may need special exercises or better shoes. If you have osteoarthritis and experience increased joint pain lasting an hour or two after walking, consider an alternate activity like stationary cycling or water exercise. Don't stop exercising altogether!

### Get fit!

When you can walk 30-40 minutes easily, incorporate some brisk intervals into your walk. For example, walk one block fast, two blocks slow and repeat several times. Gradually add more fast intervals with shorter recovery periods. Concentrate on increasing your speed while maintaining good posture. Walking hills is a great way to tone the legs. The use of Nordic walking poles can boost the calorie-burning value of your walk while promoting good posture and overall muscle endurance. Treadmill walking, while not as scenic, can be a convenient option during inclement weather.

The end of your walk is an ideal time to

stretch since your body is warmed up. Stretch your hamstrings and calves (important walking muscles) as well as your chest, shoulders and back. Hold each stretch for 15 to 30 seconds.

Listening to lively music while you walk is a great way to energize your workout. But if you wear headphones, keep the volume down and watch out for traffic that you may not hear. Find a pleasant place to walk: a beautiful park, neighborhood or shopping mall (without your wallet!). Get a friend, co-worker or family member to join you and get in shape together.

Track your progress. Although experts recommend that you walk a minimum of 30 minutes a day, there are no hard and fast rules. If walking is part of your weight loss plan, more is better. Walking 60 minutes/day and brisk intervals will help you burn more calories. Fit walking into your schedule whenever you can. That may mean three 10-minute walks over the course of a day. The best schedule is one that keeps you walking and keeps you fit!

Set a goal of participating in an organized walking event. You'll help many worthy causes and can celebrate your walking lifestyle with others. For suggestions try:

- American Volkssport Association  
[www.ava.org](http://www.ava.org)
- AHA Start walking program  
[www.mystartonline.org](http://www.mystartonline.org)
- The Walking Site  
[www.thewalkingsite.com](http://www.thewalkingsite.com)

*If you are interested in information on other health and fitness topics, contact: American Council on Exercise, 4851 Paramount Drive, San Diego, CA 92123, 800-825-3636; or, go online at [www.acefitness.org](http://www.acefitness.org) and access the complete list of ACE Fit Facts.*

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