

Creating Health & Nutrition Fact Sheets

Why Walk?

Walking is the simplest, easiest, and most inexpensive fitness program. Walking can be as easy as a stroll in the park, or it can be as intense as a brisk and vigorous hike. According to the American College of Sports Medicine, walking is a great choice for a physically active lifestyle since it can be done almost anywhere and at any time and the only equipment required is a sturdy pair of shoes.

Walking has the following benefits:

Benefits of Walking

- **Improves cardiovascular/aerobic fitness**—Walking at a moderate to brisk pace (fast enough to increase your heart rate above resting, but not so fast that you are unable to carry on a conversation) improves your aerobic fitness by increasing the strength of your heart and lungs and keeping them working efficiently.
- **Protects health**—Walking at a moderate pace for 30 to 60 minutes most days of the week provides many of the health-related benefits of a physically active lifestyle, including lowering blood pressure, improving sleep, increasing energy level, slowing down the aging process, and reducing risk for disease.
- **Lowers joint stress**—Walking is considered “low impact” because it puts very little strain on your bones and joints.
- **Strengthens bone**—Walking is also considered a

Tip
Keep a pair of walking shoes and socks in your car to take advantage of additional walking opportunities.

“weight-bearing” activity because it involves most of the major muscle groups in your legs, thighs, and buttocks. Not only can you increase the strength of these muscles by walking, you can also improve the strength and overall health of your bones.

- **Improves body composition**—Regular walking can help your body burn calories and increase your muscles. This can help you maintain or lose weight.



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General Guidelines for Beginning a Walking Program

If you are new to walking, start out slowly and gradually increase both the minutes spent walking and the distance traveled. You may want to start out by walking for 10 to 15 minutes a few times a day. Increase your time so that you can achieve your goal by walking for 20 to 30 minutes at a time. Once you achieve this goal, another goal is to challenge yourself to walk at three miles per hour, which is one mile in 20 minutes. This is a goal for any adult, including seniors, without physical limitations. Remember not to overdo it. When you are walking, you should be able to carry on a conversation. *If you have*

any health or medical concerns, be sure to check with your physician prior to beginning any exercise routine.

- Wear loose, comfortable clothes and sturdy walking shoes (see tips for finding the right shoes below).
- Spend at least 5 to 10 minutes “warming up” before you begin your walking session. Stretching your arm and leg muscles will help get blood flowing and allows your body to prepare for increased physical activity.
- Use proper walking posture. Walk tall with your head and chest up, shoulders down and relaxed, and your arms swinging naturally by your side.
- Keep your abdominal muscles tight to support your lower back.
- Be sure to allow your body to “cool down” with a slower walking pace. Do some light stretches at the end of your walking session to help your heart and breathing rates return to normal.
- Drink plenty of water before, during, and after each session, especially in hot and humid weather.
- Most important, *listen to your body*. If it hurts or is uncomfortable, chances are that it is not the right activity for you.

Prepared by Heather Baranoski, certified fitness, health, and wellness coach.

Sources: *ACSM's Fitness Book*, 3rd ed., Human Kinetics, 2003. *ACSM's Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription*, 6th ed., Lippincott Williams, and Wilkins, 2000.

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Finding the Right Shoes

Selecting the proper footwear can make a big difference in how much you enjoy walking. Remember, you are looking for the overall comfort of the shoe. Without the proper support, ill-fitting shoes can cause pain anywhere in your body, especially in your feet, legs, knees, and hips. Here are a few tips from the American College of Sports Medicine for selecting a good walking shoe:

- Try on shoes at the end of the day when your feet are tired and swollen.
- Wear the same type of socks that you will be wearing on your walks.
- Your heel should fit firmly and without slipping and you should be able to wiggle all of your toes.
- If the shoes don't fit well in the store, don't assume that they will “break in” after wearing them.
- Be sure to try on both the left and right shoe. Test them out on both carpeted surfaces and hard surfaces before buying them.