



Start Walking for Exercise

Author: Elizabeth A. Richards, PhD, RN, Associate Professor, Purdue University School of Nursing

There are many benefits to leading an active lifestyle. Participation in regular physical activity decreases the risk of many chronic diseases, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, osteoporosis, and breast, colon, bladder, kidney, and lung cancer. In addition, an active lifestyle can improve your cholesterol, lower your blood pressure, improve your sleep, and increase your energy. But you don't have to join a gym or buy expensive equipment to get these benefits. Walking is a great way to increase your physical activity.

Why walking?

Walking is one of the best types of physical activities because it is accessible to almost everyone, doesn't require specific skills or equipment, is inexpensive, can be done in a variety of settings (in your neighborhood, at the mall, around a track), and can be performed at any chosen intensity.

How much walking and physical activity do I need?

The current U.S. Physical Activity Guidelines recommend that adults get at least 150 minutes (2 hours and 30 minutes) each week of moderate-intensity physical activity, such as brisk walking. This activity should be spread throughout the week.

Note: Doing a moderate amount of activity, such as brisk walking, is generally safe for most people. However, if you have any health concerns or medical conditions, be sure to check with your health-care provider for advice on starting your walking program.

How to get started

- Start slow and easy. If you haven't gone for a walk in a while, walk 10 minutes to start.
- Do some gentle stretching before, during, and after your walk.
- Pay attention to your posture. Walk with your head lifted, eyes forward, and tummy pulled in.
- Focus on breathing. If you can't talk during your walks, you are trying to do too much. Slow down and take a few deep breaths. If you can sing, you are doing too little. Pick up your pace a bit.
- Bring water and wear a hat on sunny days.
- In the cold, wear layers, a hat, and gloves. Your base layer should fit snugly to keep you warm and wick away moisture. Your outer layer should block the wind.
- Wear a comfortable pair of gym shoes. If your shoes are new, break them in before starting your walk.
- Slowly increase the pace, distance, and/or frequency of your walks.

Set goals

- Set short-term and long-term goals. If you currently don't have a walking routine, try setting a short-term goal of 10–15 minutes of walking 4–5 times a week. After you have met this goal for a few weeks, gradually increase the time and frequency of your walks.
- Set a long-term goal of walking 30-60 minutes, 5-7 days a week.
- Track your progress by recording how long and how far you walked each time and how you felt during your walks. This could be done with paper and pen or by using a smartphone app such as MapMyWalk or Walkmeter. Over time, you will see how your walks add up, and the next day's walk won't seem as intimidating when you see how much you've already done.
- Add your walks into your calendar or to-do list. This helps make your walks part of your daily routine instead of an extracurricular activity.

Tips to add walking into every day

- Park farther away from your place of work, the grocery store, the mall entrance, etc.
- Walk during your lunch break.
- Instead of having coffee with friends, take a walk with them.
- While at work, instead of emailing a colleague, walk to that person's desk.
- Whenever you are on your cellphone, stand up and walk around.

For more information

- U.S. Physical Activity Guidelines Resources: www.health.gov/PAGuidelines/resources/#consumer
- USDA Choose MyPlate Physical Activity: www.choosemyplate.gov/physical-activity.html
- INShape Indiana: www.inshapeindiana.org/
- American Heart Association: www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/fitness/walking
- WebMD Fitness and Exercise: www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/guide/walking-for-exercise
- Mayo Clinic Walking Schedule: www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/fitness/in-depth/walking/art-20050972

Contact the Purdue Extension educator in your county for additional information on health and wellness topics.

www.extension.purdue.edu