

A person with blonde hair in a ponytail, wearing a red jacket and black pants, is walking away from the camera on a dirt path. The path is surrounded by tall, dry, yellowish-brown grass. In the background, there are rolling hills under a clear, light blue sky. Some evergreen trees are scattered across the landscape.

# WALK THIS WAY

It gets you out of the house—  
and also, as new research reports, out of mental  
ruts and into terrific physical shape.

**A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE**  
to the simplest fitness plan ever.

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So many workouts, so many excuses.  
Running? Cramps in your side.  
Swimming? Hate getting wet.  
Pilates? Expensive. Spin class? A headache.  
Walking? Um...

# WALKING?



**Finally, an exercise truly devoid of downsides.** It may not be flashy or cool, but according to growing scientific evidence, walking, done often and properly, can deliver an array of benefits that are just as impressive as those often gained from sportier regimens.

**You might call walking America’s untrendiest growing trend.** Between 2005 and 2010, the number of adults who walked for 10 minutes or more at least once a week rose from 56 to 62 percent—an increase of almost 20 million people—as reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

**An influx of pedestrian-friendly communities** around the country has something to do with it. In the past decade, many cities, including New York, Chicago, and Boston, have transformed busy traffic routes into pedestrian-friendly pathways. In 2011 the Cleveland City Council passed a “green streets” ordinance, which requires that a certain percentage of funding for road projects be spent on pedestrian-focused amenities, including crosswalks and energy-efficient lighting. In 2012 Los Angeles saw its first street-to-plaza conversion, turning an underused road into an 11,000-square-foot walking zone. “When people can travel to shops, schools, and parks without a car, walking is no longer a task on the to-do list but a natural part of their day,” says Mark Fenton, a former member of the U.S. National Racewalking Team and a public-health and transportation consultant.

## the walking advantage

Urban planning aside, plain old nagging has also nudged Americans onto their feet. Over the years, doctors, insurance companies, and public-health officials have banded together to make their message loud and clear: Walk—it’s good for you. Paul T. Williams, Ph.D., a staff scientist at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, in Berkeley, California, goes so far as to call walking “a wonder drug, except that you don’t need a prescription and you don’t have to pay for it.” He’s not exaggerating. Walking regularly will not only get you into decent shape (no more getting winded after chasing a bus) but also do a whole lot more, as the latest findings suggest.

**It lowers the rate of weight gain.** Here’s proof that slow and steady trumps fast, furious, and inconsistent. A 2013 Australian study tracked the weight of 822 subjects and found that, over the course of four years, the average person gained 3.5 pounds. But the participants didn’t pack on the pounds equally. Those who walked to work gained, on average, two pounds less than did people who took their cars, even when the car commuters were physically active at other times of the day.

**It staves off dips in energy.** Big meals can wreak havoc on blood-sugar levels and leave you feeling sluggish, but not if you time your walks appropriately. A 2013 study published in *Diabetes Care* found that three 15-minute post-meal walks each day were more effective at regulating blood-sugar levels than was a single 45-minute walk midmorning or in the afternoon.

**It lifts your spirits.** “Just 10 minutes of walking at the pace you would use if you were late for an appointment—but obviously without that stress of being late—can boost your mood for two hours,” says Robert Thayer, Ph.D., the author of *Calm Energy: How People Regulate Mood With Food and Exercise*. In his landmark 1984 study, Thayer asked volunteers to assess the severity of an ongoing personal problem (for example, weight gain or marital issues), then sent them on a 10-minute walk. Afterward, the subjects were asked to assess their problems again. This time they described their predicaments as less serious. Thayer found similar improvements in a second group of subjects who were asked to rate their level of optimism before and after a walk.

**It strengthens memory.** According to a 2011 study published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, elderly subjects who walked for 40 minutes three times a week for a year experienced a 2 percent average increase in size of the hippocampus, the part of the brain that controls memory and emotion. Those who did stretching exercises instead saw their hippocampi decline in volume by 1.4 percent on average. It’s unclear what caused these changes, but Kirk Erickson, Ph.D., the lead author of the study, suspects that increased blood flow and growth in connections between cells may be contributing factors.

**It protects you from heart disease.** Any activity that gradually gets your heart rate up is good for your cardiovascular health, and this is exactly what happens when you run or walk fast. But if that’s not your speed, there’s another option: walking longer. In a 2013 study published in *Arteriosclerosis, Thrombosis, and Vascular Biology*, both daily runners and walkers lowered their blood pressure by at least 4.2 percent and their risk of heart disease by at least 4.5 percent. To reach the calorie burn of a run, the walkers covered a distance about 1½ times farther than that of the runners.

**It may decrease your risk of some cancers.** Any type of physical activity will improve metabolism, regulate hormone levels, and enhance immune function, and walking is no different. A 2005 study reported that colorectal cancer patients who exercised or simply walked for six or more hours a week were 60 percent less likely to die from the disease than were sedentary patients. More recently, an American Cancer Society study reported that an hour of daily walking may reduce a woman’s likelihood of a breast cancer diagnosis by 14 percent. More research needs to be done, but doctors are encouraged.



**DO...**  
**...go outdoors.** Grass, sand, dirt, and roads are never completely level, so they work out muscles more effectively than a treadmill does, says Michele Olson, Ph.D., a professor of exercise science at Auburn University at Montgomery, in Alabama. You also burn more calories when you contend with wind, which, Olson says, “increases resistance, as if you’re walking up a small hill.” Research suggests that being in nature also improves mood.

**...get creative indoors.** Walking downhill is essential for building strength in the quadriceps and shins, says Olson. (Most people get sore after hiking on hills not because of the climb but because their muscles aren’t used to the descent.) So if you must walk on a treadmill, dial up the incline. And turn around, so you’re walking backward for a few minutes.



**...use a pedometer.** A 2007 Stanford University study reported that keeping track of your steps increases physical activity by about 27 percent, which amounts to roughly an extra mile of walking each day. Public-health and transportation consultant Mark Fenton recommends the Omron Tri-Axis pedometer (\$27, amazon.com), which tracks steps taken and time elapsed. You can also download the Moves mobile app (\$3, iTunes and Android Market), which requires almost zero setup and converts a smart-phone into a pedometer.

**DON’T...**  
**...dress for a jog.** Running sneakers tend to be stiff, and that can make the rolling action of walking difficult (see The Right Way to Walk, page 140). Instead, opt for flexible, lightweight walking sneakers that you can twist with your hands, says Michele Stanten, a certified group fitness instructor and the author of *Walk Off Weight*. The right



fit will depend on your arches and the terrain. As for clothing, bundle up in cold weather, but not too tightly, says John Castellani, Ph.D., an exercise physiologist at the U.S. Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine. You should be able to move comfortably, so start with a base layer of silk or a synthetic fabric with moisture-wicking technology (like Dri-Fit), then add a fleece or wool midlayer and a moisture-proof outer layer, both of which can be easily shed. In warm weather, don thin, light-colored clothing and a hat to protect your scalp from the sun.

**...carry weights.** They are not helpful and may even be harmful. Two- to five-pound dumbbells “don’t create enough resistance to develop meaningful changes in strength,” says Olson. Yet they’re heavy enough to increase the risk of shoulder injury.

**...go too slow.** Recent research published in the science journal *PLOS One* showed that the brisker the pace, the better. A study tracked almost 39,000 recreational walkers over 9.4 years and concluded that for every minute that participants shaved off a mile-long walk, their risk of premature death decreased by 1.8 percent.

**3 Walking Workouts**  
Ready to take your stroll to the next level? These routines maximize the health perks of walking. All are designed for the outdoors, but the first two can also work on a treadmill.

**The Heart-Health Walk**  
**TOTAL TIME: 30 minutes**  
A consistent, moderate pace offers good cardiovascular benefits, but interval training (short, sharp bursts of high-intensity activity interspersed with periods of low intensity) delivers those gains sooner and in a shorter workout. This routine, designed by Leslie Sansone, the creator of the *Walk at Home* fitness DVDs, takes advantage of that science and is easily adjusted for beginners. (Just lower your speed.)

- 1 | Walk for five minutes at a leisurely pace (2.5 to 3 miles per hour on a treadmill).
- 2 | Increase your speed to a brisk pace (3 to 3.6 miles per hour on a treadmill) for five minutes. If you’re walking outside, walk as if you’re running late for an appointment.
- 3 | Walk for 30 seconds (or 40 steps) as fast as possible (at least 4.5 miles per hour on a treadmill), then walk at a brisk pace (3 to 3.6 miles per hour on a treadmill) for 2 minutes. Repeat for four cycles or 10 minutes total. (As you grow more comfortable with the workout over the following weeks, you can increase the number of cycles to challenge yourself further.)
- 4 | Walk at a slightly brisk pace (3 to 3.2 miles per hour) for five minutes.
- 5 | Cool down by walking at a leisurely pace (2.5 to 3 miles per hour) for five minutes.

**The Weight-Loss Walk**  
**TOTAL TIME: 40 to 45 minutes**  
Muscle burns more calories than fat, whether you’re playing sports or sitting on the couch, says Wayne Westcott, Ph.D., the director of fitness research at Quincy College, in Massachusetts. So adding strength components to your walk will not only burn calories during your workout but also long after it. With that in mind, Barbara Crean, a

personal trainer at Clay Gym, in New York City, created this routine. Before you start, make sure your walk takes you to an area equipped with a bench, which you’ll need in the last exercise.

- 1 | Warm up for two minutes, starting at a very brisk pace (at least 3.7 miles per hour on a treadmill), and gradually edge your speed up every 30 seconds. If you’re on a treadmill, you should work up to at least 4.1 miles per hour. For you outdoor walkers, that’s a very fast walk.
- 2 | Walk for 10 minutes as fast as you can without jogging. You’ll burn more calories doing this than by running slowly because it requires extra work to keep your body from naturally breaking into a run.
- 3 | Stop walking, hit the ground, and hold a plank for one minute, making sure that your spine and buttocks form a straight line. Then do 10 push-ups. (If traditional push-ups are too difficult, lower your knees to the ground.) Follow this with 20 forward lunges on each leg. Place your weight on the front foot and lower yourself enough to create a 90-degree angle with your leg before straightening back up.
- 4 | Walk for another 10 minutes, again at top speed. It should be difficult, but not impossible, to have a conversation at this pace.

- 5 | Stop walking, get down on the ground again, and do 10 triceps push-ups (similar to regular push-ups, but with your arms placed outside your shoulders instead of under them). Next, do 40 crunches. Pull your core to your spine as you sit up.
- 6 | Walk for another 10 minutes at your top speed.
- 7 | For the last strength interval, start with dips. Sit on the edge of a bench with your hands on the edge, shoulder-width apart. Lift your rear end off the seat and walk your feet forward while keeping your buttocks as close to the edge of the bench as possible. (The farther away your feet are from the bench, the more challenging this will be.) Slowly bend your elbows to lower your body. Pause for two counts when your elbows reach 90 degrees, then straighten your arms to lift yourself back to the starting position. That’s one repetition; do 10. Finish your workout with 10 lunges on each leg, followed by a one-minute plank.



**The Chill-Out Walk**  
**TOTAL TIME: 18 to 20 minutes**

If you need to relax but can’t sit still, this meditative walk is for you. This routine, from former Buddhist monk Andy Puddicombe, who created the best-selling Headspace meditation app, is best done in a park or on a quiet street. Don’t bring music or your phone. If your only option is a noisy area, simply take note of the jackhammers or screeching traffic rather than trying to block them out. “Struggling against thoughts is what causes stress,” says Puddicombe. The steps here can be repeated for as long a walk as you want. At a minimum, aim for a mile at a comfortable clip.

1 | Start walking at a leisurely pace. Notice the trees, the signs, and the people around you. Being aware of your environment helps to keep your mind in the here and now. Continue for 30 seconds.

- 2 | Now take 30 seconds to focus on how your body feels. Heavy or light? Stiff or relaxed? Just observe; don’t attempt to change or criticize.
- 3 | Take another 30 seconds to become aware of what you hear and smell.
- 4 | Notice any physical sensations, such as the wind on your back or the weight of your arms swinging as you go. Continue for 30 seconds.

- 5 | For the next 30 seconds, bring your awareness to the rhythm of your walking and the feeling of your feet hitting the ground.
- 6 | By now you may be wondering if you’re doing it right. Relax—the only way to do this wrong is not to do it at all. Meditation isn’t about stopping thoughts or trying to judge or control them. It’s about observing them as they pile up. When your mind wanders (and most everybody’s does), gently bring it back to the sensation of your feet touching the ground.
- 7 | Return to step 1.

**THE CURE-ALL CAVEAT**  
*Everything has its limitations, and walking has two. To build a complete fitness routine around your walk, consider the following.*



**FLEXIBILITY TRAINING:** Before your walk, do a half-dozen arm circles and high-knee marches. Add more when you stop at a red light outdoors or when you finish on a treadmill, says exercise physiologist Michele Olson.

**STRENGTH TRAINING:** Add three 15-minute resistance-training or weight-lifting sessions a week, says

Erik Kirk, Ph.D., a professor of kinesiology and health education at Southern Illinois University, in Edwardsville. (Or look at the Weight-Loss Walk on the opposite page.) Brief, albeit intense, sessions can build muscle and boost metabolism significantly, according to Kirk’s 2011 study on strength training in the European Journal of Applied Physiology.

  
**walking on the Web**  
Go to [realsimple.com/walks](https://realsimple.com/walks) for downloadable Google maps of scenic but challenging walks through 10 U.S. cities. There you’ll also find five exclusive customized Spotify playlists to put some pep in your step.





## THE RIGHT WAY TO WALK

Contrary to popular belief, fitness walking doesn't have to look ridiculous. With proper form, you'll simply look like a woman on a mission. Here's how.

**Your spine** should be straight, with ears over shoulders, shoulders over hips, and hips over knees, says certified group fitness instructor Michele Stanten. **Your arms** should be bent at 90 degrees and swing back and forth (not across the body) from the shoulders. Your legs will naturally move in sync, so the faster you swing, the faster you'll walk. A foolproof tip: Hang a bathrobe belt around your neck, and hold one end in each hand, says Stanten. If you're walking correctly, the straps will stay firmly in place, not slide up and down your neck or from side to side.

**Your feet** should land heel first with each step. You should then roll through the foot and push off with your toes. "Show me the sole of your shoe at the end of every stride," says public-health and transportation consultant Mark Fenton. If you hear a slap-slap when your foot lands, you're landing too abruptly, rather than rolling smoothly.



## THE SCOOP ON 10,000 STEPS

Everyone has heard this advice by now: Aim for 10,000 steps each day to get fit. But where does that magic number come from? The figure dates back to the 1960s, in Japan, when a professor of health and welfare, Yoshiro Hatano, Ph.D., tracked habitually active walkers. His research team determined that the average man burned 300 calories—a substantial amount—by walking about 10,000 steps.

And thus was born the *manpo-kei* (translation: "10,000 steps meter"), a.k.a. the pedometer. Today experts say



that the number is a bit arbitrary. Nevertheless, counting steps, which is essentially tracking distance, is a better metric than counting minutes. "If someone walks for an hour, he could be stopping to stretch or chat," says Paul T. Williams of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, in California. "There are so many ways to fudge it." Working toward a specific health goal? Keep in mind that the number of steps to take depends on your aim.

Fifteen minutes (typically a little less than a mile) may be all you need to take down a postprandial blood-sugar spike.

But you may need to walk longer to lower your risk of breast cancer. The easiest rule of thumb: Walk as much as you can whenever you can.

"Walking is so simple," says Alpa Patel, Ph.D., the strategic director of Cancer Prevention Study-3, a research study by the American Cancer Society. "We know it has health benefits. So why not just do it?"

