The Best Medicine

Want to sleep better, have more energy, and boost your immune system? Maybe you want to lower your blood pressure, strengthen your muscles, or drop a few pounds. Start walking.

Walking or hiking at a moderate pace for 30 to 60 minutes most days of the week—that’s about 7,000 to 9,000 steps a day on your step counter—can have many of the same cardiovascular benefits as other forms of exercise, according to American College of Sports Medicine researchers (Sprow, 2019). Walking is also easy on your joints, can reduce bone and muscle loss, and may slow the aging process.

Walking’s other major selling point is that it’s one of the easiest, most inexpensive ways to get in shape. The only equipment you need is a sturdy pair of shoes, and you can do it almost anytime, anywhere—in your neighborhood, at a local park, or even at an indoor track (a great option on icy winter days).

Make Walking Work

According to the Mayo Clinic (2011), these are keys to getting the most benefit out of your walks:

- Be safe. Always check with your health care provider before you begin any exercise routine.
- Make a plan. Where will you walk? How many days will you walk? How far or how long will you walk? Will you walk alone or with a friend?
- Dress well. Wear loose, comfortable clothes and good walking shoes. (See tips below for selecting the right shoes.)
- Start gradually. If you’re new to walking for exercise, start by walking for 10 to 15 minutes a few times a day. Add a few minutes at a time until you can walk for as long as 20 to 30 minutes.
- Pick up the pace. Once you’ve built some endurance, challenge yourself to walk at 3 miles per hour or to walk 1 mile in 20 minutes.
- Cut the calories. A lower-calorie diet (combined with longer, faster walks) will tip the scale in your favor sooner.
- Be prepared. Keep walking shoes and socks in your car, and you’ll always be equipped for an extra, impromptu stroll.
- Don’t overdo it. If you are walking at the right pace for you, you should have enough breath to carry on a conversation.
Walk This Way

- Warm up. Spend at least 5 to 10 minutes stretching your arms and legs to get the blood flowing and prepare your body for increased physical activity.
- Mind your 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.
- Mind your feet. Let the heel of your foot touch the ground first, then roll your weight forward.
- Cool down. Walk at a slower pace after you’re finished with the main part of your workout, and then do some light stretches to help your heart and breathing rates return to normal.

Drink plenty of water before, during, and after your walks, especially in hot and humid weather. Most important, listen to your body. If you have pain or discomfort while you’re walking, it may not be the right activity for you right now.

Choose the Right Shoes

Proper footwear can make a big difference in how much you enjoy walking. Ill-fitting shoes can cause pain anywhere in your body, especially in your feet, legs, knees, and hips. Here are a few tips for selecting a good walking shoe:

- Buy from a shoe store that will measure your foot and help you choose a walking shoe that fits you best.
- When you’re shopping for shoes, wear the same type of socks that you will be wearing on your walks.
- Try on shoes at the end of the day when your feet are tired and swollen.
- Try on the left shoe and the right shoe, and test them out on carpeted and hard surfaces before buying them.
- 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 you wear them.

To be successful in any walking program, it is important to develop a plan that works for you, set realistic goals, and track your progress. It is also important to stay motivated. In those moments when you’re finding excuses not to walk, remember how far you’ve come, and push yourself to keep moving forward.

Sources
