

Walking 101

Get your Walking Club off on the right foot by learning and sharing the basics of walking. Here's what Walking Club members need to know before hitting the pavement.

What You'll Need

Put away the fancy equipment and gym membership card. All you need are a few essentials.

- **Walking Shoes:** Before you lace up, make sure your shoes were made for walking. They should be lightweight, breathable and provide support in the right places. Walkers land on their heels, so cushioning is thickest at the heel. Test the shoe's flexibility by trying to bend it with your hands. A bendable shoe allows your foot to easily roll forward and push off with the toes. Most importantly, keep your feet happy by wearing a shoe that fits. Otherwise, you won't make it far in shoes that hurt. Here's a tip: Try on shoes with the socks you plan to wear.
- **Clothing:** Dress for comfort and the weather. Avoid wearing cotton, which absorbs moisture and leaves you wet, cold and walking around with damp, blister-prone feet. Stay dry by wearing synthetic "wicking" fabrics that draw sweat away from the skin. Light-colored clothing reflects sunlight and keeps you cool in the summer. Winterize your walking attire by adding a layer or two of clothing. And don't forget your hands and head. Keep them toasty with mittens and a hat or scarf. Layers are easy to shed as you warm up on the walk.
- **Water:** Take frequent sips of water while you walk, even if you're not thirsty. About a cup every 15 minutes should be enough to keep you hydrated.* You may need to add a few extra gulps on a hot day. Also make sure to drink up before and after a walk.
- **Sun Protection:** Don't let sunburn spoil a walk. Protect your skin by applying sunscreen with a SPF of at least 15 about half an hour before heading outdoors. And cover up with a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses with UV protection.

Personalize Your Walking Plan

You may be walking as a group, but the path to better health is different for each person. Create a personalized walking plan that allows you to set your own pace and get the most out of your workout.

- **Start slow and work up.** If you haven't exercised in a while, don't sweat it. Take it slow and make sure the speed and length of your walk match your fitness level. The talk test is an easy way to check whether you should speed up or slow down. If you can sing your favorite tune, pick up the pace. If a conversation with a walking buddy leaves you panting, ease off a bit. You may start out walking 15 minutes a day. Then, as you feel ready, kick it up a notch until you reach at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity walking each week.
- **Wear a step-counting pedometer.** Counting your steps will encourage you to increase your activity. Start with 5,000 steps or less, and work your way up to 10,000 steps a day.
- **Mark your calendar.** Life gets busy, so make sure you're free when it's time to slip on those walking shoes.
- **Set specific goals.** There are many benefits to walking, but each person has their own reasons. So what moves you? Want to lose weight? Need to lower your blood pressure? Want to have more energy? Setting clear goals will help you track your progress. But be realistic. Start with small goals that are easy to attain, such as walking 15 minutes, and then gradually set higher goals.
- **Write it down.** Keep a personal walking log. Simply writing down how long you walked, how far and how you felt can help you track your progress and reach your goals.
- **Stick with the basics.** You don't have to be a marathon runner to reap the rewards of exercise. In fact, as far as exercise goes, walking is the most effective way to keep your heart strong. With that sort of payoff, who needs washboard abs? Keep it simple and develop a walking plan that works for you.

"My doctor had the physical therapist go over a list of exercise suggestions, but in the end, we determined that walking was the best because I could stick with it and liked it best."

Robert Farish, Congestive heart failure survivor

TIPS FOR STAYING SAFE

- Make it easy for drivers to see you. Wear light-colored clothing, especially when it's dark. Even better, wear reflective clothing or carry a flashlight.
- Always walk on the sidewalk. For neighborhoods without sidewalks, walk facing traffic. That way, even if drivers can't see you, you can see them.
- Watch your footing. Beware potholes, tree roots, rocks and uneven ground.
- Take notice of the traffic – both cars and fast-moving bikers – around you before crossing or entering a street.
- Health-care providers can provide useful personalized advice on how to reduce risk of injuries. If you have a chronic health condition, see a healthcare provider before beginning a new physical activity routine.

THE BEST STRETCHES FOR WALKING

- **Hamstring stretch:** Prop one foot up on a low, secure bench or stairstep. Stand tall. While keeping your chest high, hips square and tailbone lifted, bend forward from your hips.
- **Calf stretch:** Stand facing a wall and place both hands on it. Position one foot forward with knee bent and the other leg back with the leg straight, toes pointing at the wall. With your stomach tight, lean in toward the wall.
- **Hip flexor stretch:** Lunge one leg forward with knee bent. Keep the back leg straight or slightly bent. Push your hips forward until you feel a stretch in front of your back thigh near the groin. Keep your torso upright and your front knee behind your toes.
- **Inner thigh stretch:** Stand with your feet spread wider than shoulder width apart. Keeping your torso upright, push your weight to one side with a bent knee over the toe. Keep your other leg straight.
- **Chest stretch:** Place your fingertips lightly on the back of your head. Push your elbows back while squeezing with your upper back until you feel a stretch in your chest near your underarms.

- **Injury-Proof Your Walk.** Don't get sidelined by a walking injury. Keep your strides long and strong by learning how to prevent the pains and strains of walking. Healthcare providers can provide useful, personalized advice on how to reduce risk of injuries. If you have a chronic health condition, see a healthcare provider before beginning a new physical activity routine.
- **Loosen up.** Warm up cold muscles by walking at an easy pace for the first few minutes. After your warm-up, take the time to stretch. Flexibility exercises should focus on your hamstrings, calves, hips and chest. Once you feel a slight pull, hold the stretch for 20 to 30 seconds. End each walk with the same stretches.
- **Replace old shoes.** Although you don't need to worry about breaking in walking shoes, you do need to worry about wearing them out. Shoes begin to lose their cushioning after 350 to 500 miles of walking, so hit the road in a new pair every three to six months.
- **Walk the right way.** Is it possible to walk wrong? You bet. A sloppy gait slows you down and puts stress on your muscles and joints. Walk faster and farther by having good form. Keep your head up, stomach in and shoulders relaxed. Allow your heel to hit the ground first, then roll your foot and push off from the toe. And stick to your natural step length. If you want to pick up speed, take quicker steps instead of longer ones.

“It is important to take small attainable steps that are achievable and will ultimately lead to success. People are more likely to stick with a behavior change if they feel successful at it.”

Elizabeth Pegg Frates, MD

Institute of Lifestyle Medicine at Harvard Medical School

“Keeping a log can allow you to pat yourself on the back when you suddenly have concrete proof that you just walked four times per week for three weeks straight!”

Martica Heaner, PhD

Behavioral nutritionist and exercise physiologist

Author of *Cross-Training for Dummies*

Example Weekly Walking Log

Week of:

This week's goal:

Example: My goal is to walk 120 minutes this week.

Day	Minutes	Miles	Steps	Speed	Route	How I Felt	Notes
Sunday	40 minutes	2 miles	4,350 steps	Moderate	Park	The walk helped me relax	I slept better Sunday night.
Monday							
Tuesday							
Wednesday							
Thursday							
Friday							
Saturday							

My totals for this week: _____ minutes

_____ miles

_____ steps