

# Walking for Exercise

## A Physical Therapist's Perspective



**W**alking is a great low-impact exercise for developing and maintaining cardiovascular fitness. You can walk anywhere at any time, and, unlike some fitness regimens, your only expense is comfortable clothing and a good pair of shoes.

Once you start your walking program, you will be taking your first steps toward increasing your fitness level. Walking is associated with a reduced risk of heart attack, and regular exercise decreases your risk of developing type 2 diabetes. Other benefits of walking include increased energy, improvement in cardiovascular fitness, increased muscle tone, stress reduction, and weight control.

To learn more about physical therapists, please visit the American Physical Therapy Association (APTA) at [www.apta.org](http://www.apta.org). To find a physical therapist in your area, click on "Find a PT."

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## Before You Start

If you answer yes to any of these questions, please check with your physical therapist or physician before you begin a walking program.

- Do you have heart trouble?
- Do you experience chest pains or pain on your left side (neck, shoulder, or arm) or breathlessness when you are physically active?
- Do you often feel faint or have dizzy spells?
- Do you have high blood pressure?
- Do you have bone or joint problems that could worsen if you are physically active?
- Are you over 50 and have not been physically active?

## Starting Your Walking Program

Start slow and easy. If you've been inactive and tire easily, it's best to walk only as far and as fast as you comfortably can, gradually building up your pace and distance.

### Make your walking program work for you.

If you cannot set aside at least 30 consecutive minutes in your day, then split up your time—10 minutes here, 20 minutes there—as long as you get at least 30 minutes each day.

### Choose a fun and safe place to walk.

Consider mall walking groups, or walking groups that walk on designated trails. The best walking surfaces are flat, firm, and not too hard, such as grass, wood chip paths, dirt paths, and cinder tracks.

## Monitoring Your Progress

Knowing your resting heart rate lets you measure your initial fitness level and your improvement over time. Monitor your progress by recording your pulse before you walk. After you complete your walk, check and record your pulse once more.

### To Measure Your Pulse:

Place your index and third finger on your neck to the side of your windpipe. Or, place two fingers between the bone and tendon on the thumb side of your wrist. When you feel your pulse, look at your watch and count the number of pulses in 15 seconds. Multiply this number by 4 to get your heart rate per minute—for example,  $20 \times 4 = 80$  beats per minute. A resting heart rate that is between 60 and 80 beats per minute is considered normal.



# The Importance of Exercise

Physical therapists support the US Surgeon General’s recommendation that adults 18 or older need a minimum of 30 minutes of moderate physical activity five or more days a week to be healthy; children and teens need 60 minutes of physical activity each day.

## If the Shoe Fits

One of the most important steps you can take is to wear the right shoes. Consider the following:

- The **insole** should match the arch of your foot.
- The **sole** should be made from a foam material for cushioning and it should bend at the forefoot rather than the mid-foot.
- The **heel** should be made from a foam material to provide shock absorption.
- **Breathable materials** such as leather and cotton canvas are preferable to synthetics or plastic.
- The **toe box** should provide plenty of wiggle room for the toes in both depth and width.
- The **heel grip** should hold the heel snugly in place. A padded cuff at the top opening may provide a firmer grip and cause less friction on the skin.

## Gait

Your gait, your own particular style of walking, determines the distribution of the stress of walking to the various parts of your legs and feet. While there is no single proper gait, if you develop pain or discomfort while walking, a gait analysis from a physical therapist can tell you if there are any potential problems.

## Additional Resources

For further information about physical fitness, you may wish to contact the following organizations:

The National Blueprint: Increasing Physical Activity Among Adults Age 50 and Older [www.agingblueprint.org](http://www.agingblueprint.org)

The President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports [www.fitness.gov](http://www.fitness.gov)

National Institute on Aging [www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation](http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation)

Action for Healthy Kids [www.actionforhealthykids.org/index.htm](http://www.actionforhealthykids.org/index.htm)



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# Keep a Log

Recording your walks is a great way to see how far you’ve progressed. Consider using our log to step up your walking program.

- **Miles/Steps:** Track your walking distance by referring to mileposts on paths or laps at the track. If you are using a pedometer, keep track of your steps.
- **Time:** Time the duration of your walk.
- **Resting Heart Rate (RHR):** Resting heart rate is generally lower in people who are physically fit. You can either

wear an electronic device that measures your heart rate or you can periodically measure your pulse at your wrist or neck. Monitor your progress by recording your pulse before and after you walk.

- **Rate of Perceived Exertion (RPE):** If you can’t measure your pulse, try using a “conversational pace” to monitor your efforts during walking. For example, if you can’t talk and walk at the same time, get out of breath quickly, or have to stop to catch your breath, you probably are working too hard.

Walking Log

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Miles/Steps:							
Time:							
RHR:							
RPE:							
Notes:							