

The Walking Workout (reprinted with permission from IDEA Health & Fitness Organization)

Recent research results could hardly be clearer: taking a walk is one of the best ways to take charge of your health. A study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (February 11, 1998) showed that walking briskly for half an hour just six times a month cut the risk of premature death in men and women by 44 percent. A study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (January 8, 1997) reported that men 61 to 81 years old sharply reduced their risk of death from all causes, including cancer and heart disease, by walking two miles a day. Other research has shown similar results for women.

Besides the well-documented health benefits, the beauty of walking is you can go at your own pace. If you are new to exercise or recovering from injury or childbirth, you can aim to walk for 20 to 45 minutes four or five days a week at the good fitness walking speed of three miles an hour. When (and if) you want to power up, you can take longer walks and work up to walking each mile in 15 minutes or less.

Once you're ready to hit the road (or the trail, track, treadmill or mall), how do you make the most of your walking workout? Minneapolis, Minnesota walking instructor Kate Larsen, who has developed the LifeWalk™ Easy Audio Coach tape (888-LIF-WALK), offers these 10 practical tips for getting maximum aerobic, strength, postural and conditioning benefits from your walking program:

- 1. Warm Up First, Then Stretch.** Start by walking for just seven to 10 minutes (wear a watch) and then do a few gentle stretches. Your muscles will stretch better if you've warmed them up first. Ask a fitness professional which stretches are best for you.
- 2. Take Short, Quick Steps.** By taking short, quick steps, rather than long strides, you will work your glute muscles (in your buttocks) as you log miles.
- 3. Practice the Heel-Toe Roll.** Push off from your heel, roll through the outside of the foot, then push through the big toe. Think of the big toe as the Go button and push off with propulsion. Keep the other toes relaxed. (This takes practice.)
- 4. Squeeze Your Glutes.** Imagine squeezing and lifting your glutes up and back, as if you were holding a \$50 bill between them! This will strengthen your low-back muscles. Developing the ability to maintain this deep contraction throughout your walk will take a while.
- 5. Zip Up Your Abs.** During your walk, imagine you're zipping up a tight pair of jeans. Stand tall and pull your abdominal muscles up and in. You can practice this even when you're not walking.
- 6. Pump Your Arms.** Imagine you are holding the rubber grips of ski poles in your hands. Stand straight, drop your shoulders, squeeze your shoulder blades behind you and push back your elbows with each step. Keep your arm movements smooth and strong.
- 7. Keep Your Chest Up, Shoulders Back.** Use your walk as an opportunity to practice perfect posture. Imagine someone dumped ice down your back. That's the feeling you want to have as you hold your chest up and shoulders back.
- 8. Keep Your Head Up.** Look about 10 feet ahead of you. Imagine you're wearing a baseball cap and have to look up just enough to see the road. This keeps your neck aligned properly.
- 9. Smile and Have Fun.** Learning these techniques takes time and concentration. Be patient and enjoy your workout. Dress comfortably, find a partner or wear a headset and listen to music you love and, if you're walking outdoors, vary your route.
- 10. Practice Mental Fitness.** Don't replay the problems of the day while you walk. Try to maintain a state of relaxed awareness by paying attention to your breathing and noticing how your body feels. Visualize yourself getting healthier, stronger and leaner.

A Habit You Can Live With

Consistency is probably the most important part of your walking workout. The more committed you are to walking all or most days of the week, the healthier you'll be. Remember that short walks are better than no walks! Health, like life, is a journey. All you have to do is take the first step.



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