



Improve Your Walking Workout

These tips will help you increase the pace of your walk to gain maximum benefit.

Deciding to become a little more active than you are right now can lead to improvements in your health and outlook on life, as well as to reductions in your pain.

Walking is the easiest activity to increase, since you already do it throughout the day. But how much more should you do? How often should you do it? How fast should you go? For how long?

The FIT formula – Frequency (how often), Intensity (how fast) and Time (how long) – helps you find answers. When you walk or do any physical activity, start at a low level and increase slowly. Doing too much too fast can lead to injuries that set you back instead of move you forward.

When you're ready to increase your activity, alter just one part of the FIT formula at a time. "That way, if trouble begins, such as pain in the knee, it is easier to tell which component of the exercise program caused the problem," says Sharon Hame, MD, assistant professor of orthopaedic surgery at the University of California at Los Angeles School of Medicine. "Then the problem can easily be corrected and another area of the program advanced."

To start: If you can tolerate only a five-minute walk, then start by walking just five minutes a day on two or three days per week, maybe as slow as one mile per hour (mph). Build slowly from there. If you already go for walks occasionally but want to make walking a habit, start by walking at least 10 to 15 minutes while maintaining the same speed, about 2 mph or 3 mph, three days per week.

To increase: Every four to six weeks, bump up your frequency by adding one more day per week. In two months, you should be walking four or five days per week, even if you don't increase how fast or how long you walk. When you're ready to make a second increase, choose either to walk the same distance faster or walk a few minutes longer at your usual pace.

Listen to your body: If your joints hurt when you walk faster, it's OK to walk slower while you adjust to your new routine. Remember: It isn't cheating to drop down to an easier level for a while. In fact, one study showed that walking at a 2-mph pace still burns calories while producing 25 percent less stress on knees. Lowering your intensity is preferred over decreasing frequency or not moving at all. "I always advise my patients to continue an exercise program but modify it to limit pain and discomfort," says Dr. Hame.

You know when you need to slow down and when your body can "go the extra mile." Adjust your intensity and the length of your walk, as necessary, while maintaining your frequency, and you may find you're walking faster and longer – and reaping more health benefits – before you know it.

Get in the habit: If you start walking each day, chances are good that in two weeks you'll start to feel a difference in pain, function, and mood. In six weeks, you'll start to see a difference in muscle tone and weight. And in 12 weeks you will have made walking a daily habit, the same as brushing your teeth. Then it's time for a pat on the back.