

I'm always a little amazed when people drive across town to the gym, hunt around for a place to park, change their clothes, sign up for a treadmill, and wait in line to use it, all just to take a nice walk. Making such a big production of it makes it more work than fun, more exercise than pleasure. What a waste of time. Don't get me wrong I am a gym rat at heart, but why even come to the gym if you're just going to walk? Experts say people like me unfairly place this form of exercise in the "pointless" category. It turns out, you may be missing out on an extremely effective physical activity, not to mention the mental boost by writing off walking entirely. The best thing about walking is that it's so simple. Why complicate it? Science proves that placing one foot in front of the other leads to some seriously impressive physical and mental benefits. Walking is an activity that is accessible to all, and you can do it from your door step. Walking is as close to free as it gets. You don't need fancy shoes, or clothes, or equipment. A walk will only cost you some time and a little rubber off the bottom of your shoes. Can you really walk your way to fitness? People who walk regularly swear by the health and psychological benefits of their daily jaunt. Here are great reasons to lace up your shoes and get started.

The recommended amount of exercise for adults is 150 minutes of moderate physical activity per week. That breaks down to 30 minutes of exercise over 5 days. And remember, physical activity doesn't have to be complicated. Taking a 30 minute walk a day is kind of like a proverbial apple. There's a good chance it'll keep the doctor away. Something as simple as a daily brisk walk (walking with a raised pulse and faster breathing but being able to maintain a conversation comfortably) can help you live a healthier life. Regular brisk walking can help maintain a healthy weight. Prevent and manage various conditions, including heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, depression, and anxiety. Walking strengthens bones and muscles, improves your mood, and even improves your balance and coordination, the list goes on... The faster, farther and more frequently you walk, the greater the benefits. Starting to think your neighbour who walks around the block every morning is on to something?

Starting a walking program takes initiative. So where do you start? To get you on the right foot all you need is a pair of comfortable shoes and to get yourself out the door or onto the treadmill. Set yourself up for success by starting slowly. Especially if you haven't

been exercising regularly. You might start with five minutes a day the first week, and then increase your time by five minutes each week until you reach 30 minutes. Focus on consistency. You'll notice your body getting stronger as time goes on. Once you have built your walking time and speed you are ready to have some fun. You can train for a 5K walk, which is 5 kilometers or 3.1 miles long. This is a popular distance for charity walks and fun runs and will take 45 minutes to an hour to finish. You may also want to join a walking group or club so you will have others to walk with and incentive to keep going with your new walking habit. If you have an ongoing health condition, talk to your doctor before starting any new exercise program.

All exercise is good for us, but outdoor activities, whether it is walking, cycling, biking or canoeing, have an added advantage in that they take place outside and connect us with nature. This connection with nature has a restorative effect on our wellbeing, boosting our sense of connection with the seasons and our environment. When you walk outside, you're exposing your skin to sunlight, which prompts the body to make vitamin D, a nutrient up to 75% of Canadian adults don't get enough of. Where you walk matters. Psychologists have learned that attention is a limited resource that continually drains throughout the day. A crowded intersection, cars, street lights and billboards bats our attention around. In contrast walking in a park, past a pond, under large trees allows our mind to drift casually from one sensory experience to another, from rustling trees to singing birds. So, ditch the smoggy congested route for a nearby park or green space.



Rather than skipping your walk if the weather's bad or when it's dark outside, you can hop on a treadmill anytime, even if you only have a few minutes. Plus, if your treadmill is in constant view, it serves as a visual reminder. The power of an effective walking workout lies within your hands, literally. All those buttons on the treadmill are there for a reason. It's time you start hitting a few of them.

You can get just as good a workout walking on a treadmill as you can running on one. Utilize the incline feature. The higher you set the incline, the more energy your body is forced to use to help activate your quads, calves and glutes. Mimicking walking up and down hills. This increase of energy burns fat and calories. Play a game. While watching TV, speed up when a commercial comes on. Pick a character on your soap opera and speed up for each 2- or 3-minute segment that he/she is on-screen. Or, *boogie* away the miles. Create a playlist of fast and slow songs. Adjusting your speed accordingly. Have fun with it, nobody has to know that you still love disco. Stayin Alive! Time will fly and so will you when you're walking to your favorite beats.

While the physical benefits are notable, the mental boost that can be garnered from adding walking to your daily routine are more immediate. If you've ever gone for a walk in a huff and come back more clear, calm and collected, you know firsthand that walking can reduce your response to stress. Walking gives you time to think, as well as time to get away from stressors. Getting out of the stressful environment, breathing the air, and feeling your body move is natural stress-relief. Time to Think: "All truly great thoughts are conceived while walking," said philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Take a walk and the blood flow to your brain is increased. It gives you time to consider different aspects of your problems away from the distractions of your office or home. Creative ideas and solutions flow more easily. It's good to take care of your mind and body, so why not work on maintaining both at the same time? Many people refuse to try meditation because they don't want to sit in silence for extended periods of time. Walking meditation lets you enjoy all of the mental benefits while adding some physical benefits as well.

There is no shortage of scientific research to back up the effectiveness of adding walking to your fitness routine. I guess that's why walking is such a well-worn metaphor for life. All you've got to do is keep putting one foot in front of the other. Once you take your first step, you are on your way to an important destination, better health.

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