



STEPPING UP YOUR PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: WALKING TO IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH

Related reading

► [Walkability checklist](#)

► [Walking: the activity of a lifetime](#)

What is Canada's most popular physical activity? No, it isn't hockey or soccer - it's walking. For most of us, walking is the single most beneficial, all-purpose physical activity. Walking is a gentle activity that treats the body with great respect by placing just the right amount of stress on the joints. People of all ages and virtually all levels of physical ability can walk comfortably with little risk of injury. Walking is an inexpensive activity that can be done year-round (both indoors and outside).

Walking is enjoyable, relaxing, and good for you, too! Regular brisk walking for 30 minutes on four to seven days a week will reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, osteoporosis, and some cancers. Habitual walkers also benefit from increased energy levels, more stamina, better sleep, and lower stress levels. No wonder 71% of Canadians reported walking for exercise, which makes it our most popular physical activity. So, what are you waiting for? Let's get started!

Getting started

Focus on the enjoyment of being more physically active. Although walking doesn't require lessons or specialized equipment, the following suggestions can help ensure a positive walking experience.

- **To start, pick a simple destination.** Begin with a walk around your neighbourhood or another familiar place. Sidewalks and pathways should be level and free of cracks to minimize your risk of falling. Choose a route that is pleasant, perhaps one with grass, flowers, and trees. Ensure that your route is appropriately lit if you choose to walk at night.
- **Dress for the weather.** Choose clothing that is right for the season. Wear layers of comfortable clothing that won't restrict your movement. Protect your eyes and skin during all seasons. Don't forget to put on that sunscreen, and on sunny days, wear your hat and sunglasses.
- **Pamper those feet.** What's most important is that your shoes feel comfortable. Inexpensive running shoes are great for walking if they fit well. Here are some things to look for in a good shoe:
 - ◇ Ensure you have about a thumb's width of space between the tip of your longest toe and the end of the shoe when you stand up.
 - ◇ Look for shoes that fit the widest part of your foot. The shoe's heel should fit firmly on your foot to minimize the movement up and down.
 - ◇ Shoes with flexibility under the balls of your feet (that is, not too stiff) will also be more comfortable. Leather, nylon or synthetic fabric are all suitable for your shoe's outer material.
- **Warm-up and cool-down.** Perform gentle stretching exercises for the muscles in your lower legs and mobility exercises for your ankles with each walking workout. (This is especially important for people who have not been regularly physically active.) Listen to your body-stretch only until you begin to feel the muscle pull (not to the point of discomfort) and hold for 10-20 seconds.
- **Start slowly and build up.** Canada's Physical Activity Guide recommends that we accumulate 30 to 60 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week. The good news is that you

can accumulate your activity in 10-minute sessions. For example, you could walk with your children to school (10 minutes). At noon, you could choose to walk to your favourite restaurant for lunch (another 10 minutes). Later in the day, you might be able to squeeze in a 20-minute walk with the dog while dinner is heating in the oven.

Gradually extend the length of your walks before you decide to walk more quickly, to make it easier on your body as you increase your activity level. Experts suggest increasing the length of your walk by 10-20% to reach the recommended 30 to 60 minutes of daily physical activity. For example, if you have been successfully completing a 20-minute walk for a few weeks, try adding two to four more minutes (making it a 22 to 24-minute walk) for the next few weeks. Once you are more active, you will reap more health benefits from walking faster and adding more steps to your day.

- **Schedule time to walk.** Choose walking times that suit your schedule and routine. Schedule your workouts into your daytimer as if they were important appointments. If you think of your workout as an appointment with yourself, you are more likely to keep it. Place a high priority on your health and well-being. Remind yourself about the health benefits you gain by walking regularly.
- **Walk safely.** Consult your physician before starting a walking program if you have not been regularly active. Remember to drink at least 150 mL of water (a little more than half a cup) every 15 to 20 minutes of walking. Choose safe, well-lit routes and consider walking with others. Do shrubs block the sidewalk or pathway? Were the streets easy to cross? How busy is the traffic on your walk? Be aware of your surroundings-you might want to leave your headphones at home.

Setting goals

Being motivated to make positive changes in your life is the first step towards a healthy lifestyle. People who set goals are much more likely to achieve them. Your S.M.A.R.T. activity plan should include goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely.

For example, “I will walk the dog for 30 minutes after work five times per week for the next two weeks.”

- **Specific. “I will walk the dog?”** Provide enough detail so that you know exactly what you should be doing and when you should be doing it.
- **Measurable. “...for 30 minutes?”** Decide how you will assess your progress. You will then have some tangible evidence for your successes. For example, you could measure the time you are active or the number of steps you accumulate. (For more information about measuring your activity, see the section below, entitled, “Measuring your progress”.)
- **Attainable. “...after work?”** Set your own goals, rather than having someone else set them for you. You know best your strengths and weaknesses and can use this information to maximize your chances of success.
- **Realistic. “...five times per week?”** Better to plan only a few things and be successful, rather than many things and be unsuccessful. Success breeds success! Start with small goals that are challenging, but that you can accomplish.
- **Timely. “...for the next two weeks”** Be realistic about how long it will take you to achieve your goal. Say when you plan to work at your goal.

Measuring your progress

One strategy to help you increase your physical activity is to monitor your walking sessions. A number of tools can help you measure and monitor your progress. For example, a [physical activity log](#) (requires PDF reader) or an [activity tracker](#) is a valuable accountability tool to record your daily physical activity.

If your goal is to walk for 45 minutes during lunch on a minimum of four days per week, then place a checkmark or star on your logbook/calendar on each day that you meet that goal.

Perhaps you wear a pedometer to track all the steps you take during the day. Record the number of steps at the end of each day to determine whether you have met your personal goal. You can see at a glance how you have progressed over time.

About pedometers

The electronic pedometer is a low-cost device used to count the number of steps you take. Many sporting goods and department stores now sell pedometers. You can also search for information on pedometers on the Internet.

Using a pedometer can be a good way to get motivated to be more physically active. A pedometer can help you set goals and keep track of the number of steps you take in a day.



How do I use a pedometer?

Attach the pedometer to your belt, slacks, or skirt in line with the middle of your leg. To get a more accurate reading, try different positions along your waist. Then count (in your head) the number of steps you take and compare that number to the number on the pedometer.

Put the pedometer on when you first get up in the morning and wear it all day long. At the end of the day, record your number of steps and then press the reset button to return the step counts back to zero.

To start, calculate the average number of steps you take in a day and then gradually increase your average.

What are the advantages of pedometers?

Pedometers are similar in size to a pager, simple to use, and can be worn by most people. Pedometers are also relatively inexpensive gadgets—ranging from CDN \$15 to \$75 (on average they cost about CDN\$30).

Used as a self-monitoring tool, pedometers give you immediate feedback about your activity throughout the day.

As you monitor the number of steps accumulated each day, your progress towards your goals can enhance your confidence.

What are the limitations of pedometers?

Pedometers do not measure the frequency (how often), intensity (how hard), or duration (how long) you have been physically active. For example, a pedometer can't distinguish between walking and running. A pedometer also can't measure upper-body exercises, water sports, or cycling.

More complicated pedometers can estimate the total distance travelled and/or the number of calories. Since both of these values are estimated, they are prone to greater error than the number of steps recorded by the pedometer.

Currently, it is difficult to relate the number of steps/day to Canada's Physical Activity Guide recommendations (which use minutes rather than steps). However, if you would like to know more about your current physical activity, first set your pedometer to zero. Go for an enjoyable 30-minute walk and then check the number of steps on your pedometer. Try this a few times on different days to get a "ball park" figure for the number of steps you accumulate in 30 minutes.

Depending on the length of your step, 30 minutes of walking will be between 2,400 and 3,600 steps. Once you know how many steps you take in 30 minutes, your step tally at the end of the day should help you determine how active you are in relation to the recommendations in Canada's Physical Activity Guide to Healthy Active Living.

For more information about pedometers, visit [Pedometer information sheet: get physically active one step at a time!](#)

You may also want to monitor other aspects of your walking program. As you progress, try to increase the length of your walk—this is called **duration**. For example, if you have been walking for 20 minutes three times a week, try increasing the length of your walk to 25 minutes, then 30 minutes, over the next few weeks.

If you are unable to increase the length of your walk, try to increase the number of days you walk each week (this is called **frequency**). If you have been walking three times per week, try adding one or two more sessions each week.

Finally, you may want to cover more distance in the same amount of time (this is **intensity**). Walking briskly increases your health benefits more quickly than a leisurely walk. To ensure that you are walking at a safe and appropriate intensity, use the Talk Test as a guide.

But what if... – Barriers 101

- **“I don’t have time to walk.”** On the days when you can’t seem to set aside a half hour for a walk, find shorter amounts of time where walking naturally fits into your schedule. Take a quick look at your calendar and check off the places when you could walk instead of driving.

Including walking as part of your travel time is known as active transportation. For example, get off the bus/train a few stops early and walk the rest of the way. Leave the car at home and walk to do errands in your neighbourhood. If possible, walk with your children to school.

Remind yourself about the health benefits you gain by walking regularly. You may not notice the long-term benefits right away, but you will notice that you have more energy, sleep better, and feel happier.

- **“I haven’t been physically active since high school/since I was a kid.”** Even small lifestyle changes, such as walking around a soccer field during your child’s game or walking around the airport during a layover, can improve your health. Walking allows you to accomplish several things at once. Incorporate walking into your daily schedule to get to work, walk your kids to school, do errands, or visit a friend.
- **“Walking is boring.”** Inject some fun into walking to keep you motivated. Make walking dates with friends. Try including walking meetings at work (your colleagues will benefit as well).

Vary your routine. Walk at different times of day. Explore new walking routes. If you always walk on a trail, try heading downtown or pick out an interesting neighbourhood to see new sights as you stroll. Variety is the spice of life!

- **“I am too tired.”** After getting home from work, making dinner, and loading laundry into the washer, grabbing the remote control may seem very inviting, but slipping on a comfortable pair of shoes and going for a walk will revitalize you! Walking regularly can boost your energy, increase stamina, reduce tension and fatigue, and promote better sleep.

Walk at a comfortable pace that makes you breathe more deeply. Huffing and puffing is normal gasping for air means you are walking too quickly.

References

Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute (web site). *Popularity of physical recreation activities of adults, age 20+*. Accessed August 21, 2008.

This article was prepared by the *Alberta Centre for Active Living*.

It can be found at www.centre4activeliving.ca/publications/chn/feature-articles/.

Production of this material has been made possible through a financial contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of Public Health Agency of Canada.

The talk test

If you can carry on a conversation while walking briskly, you are setting a good pace.

If you are breathless and unable to talk while walking, you are going faster than you need to. Activity should be done at a comfortable level, somewhere between fairly light and somewhat hard.