

# Ways to max your walking

Simply putting one foot in front of the other can lead to some great benefits for the body and soul. Here's how to make your walks work harder for you.

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UNSPASH.

Philosopher Henry David Thoreau's most meaningful essay was about walking. To put it mildly, he was obsessed. "Every walk is a sort of crusade," he proclaimed. Without walking, he said he could not preserve his health or sprits. He also couldn't write. For Thoreau, walking was not just a physical act, but a spiritual one too. And today, science has caught up with his musings, as more and more data stacks up on the side of walking being one of the best things you can do for your health and mind.

"It has a plethora of physical and mental benefits," says Mairead Hallissey, a physiotherapist at Melbourne's BalanceNorth, noting that research shows it can help manage chronic disease, reduce the risk of some cancers and lower blood sugar too. It's also readily accessible, low-cost and is forgiving to our joints and poses less injury risk than other forms of exercise.

"Even better, walking at a brisk pace can provide health benefits similar to running," says Mairead. "It's one of the most underrated forms of cardiovascular exercise."

Now we know you know how to walk. But there are some easy ways to take the simple act of getting from A to B on foot, and transform it into a meaningful event for your body and brain. Here's how.

## Buddy up

If you're struggling with motivation or can't fit everything in to a busy schedule, combine socialising with exercise.

"Working out with a friend has many benefits that include enhancing consistency, duration and motivation," says Mairead. And science backs it up: a meta-study compiled by the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* found that people who engage in outdoor walking groups have significant improvements in blood pressure, resting heart rate, body fat, BMI percentages and lung function. Social walkers were also significantly less depressed too. In good news, you're also likely to work harder: the Köhler Effect is the idea in

behavioural science that no-one wants to be the weakest link in a group. When it comes to working out, that means you may find a competitive edge you did not know you had. "Seeing what others are capable of doing will inspire you to do more," says Mairead.

## Chase beauty

While any walking you do is valuable, "we know that natural or 'green views' and water-based 'blue views' are good for us," says Dr Ruth Allen, a psychotherapist and author of *Grounded*. "They are calming for our minds and bodies, restorative of our attention and can in some cases act as a natural painkiller." This is backed up by science: according to the Green Exercise Research Team at the University of Essex, natural vistas have been shown to help us recover from fatigue, enhance cognition, reduce stress levels and generate an overall improvement in mental wellbeing.

## Healthy habits

Most of us know the importance of stretching after we exercise, but you can reduce your risk of injury and improve athletic performance further by warming up too. "The warm-up allows your body temperature to rise slowly and is a chance to target the muscles and joints that you're about to use," Mairead says. Walk gently for a few minutes and once your body doesn't feel cold, complete these dynamic mobility exercises.

**Ankle circles:** Stand on one leg and raise the other leg and slowly rotate your ankle in one direction eight times and then repeat on the other ankle.

**Hip circles:** Standing on both legs, gently rotate your hips to move your pelvis in a circle. Repeat eight times in one direction and then repeat in the opposite direction.

**Leg swings:** Stand on one leg and hold onto chair/ wall for support. Move the other leg to the front and back and then side and back, repeat this movement eight times and then repeat on the other leg.

**Walking lunges:** Walk 10m in alternating lunges.

### 3 free apps to get you moving



#### AllTrails: Hike, Bike & Run

No matter where you are in the world, find a walk at your level.



#### Map My Walk by Under Armour

Track your routes, pace and distances covered, plus connect with friends too.



#### Strava Training

While runners and cyclists love Strava, it's also great for walkers wanting to keep tabs on their progress and participate in challenges.

## Don't coast

Ensure your walking continues to build cardiovascular fitness by increasing the challenge. In addition to increasing steps, vary the terrain on your routes (head for the hills!), and add some upper-body exercises with hand weights such as bicep curls or shoulder presses. "Even just holding the hand weights will increase your walking intensity," says Mairead Hallissey. Another clever way to boost the benefits of your walk is to interval train. "Walk at a comfortable pace for one minute and then at a faster pace for the same amount of time, and then repeat," says Mairead, "We burn the most calories by repeatedly raising and lowering our heart rate." For added motivation, sync your intervals with your playlist, choosing a track with a faster cadence followed by one with a slower beat. "This is a fun and easy way to make your usual walk an interval workout."

## Protect your ankles

"Comfortable shoes are the only equipment needed for walking, but it's worth spending some time to find the right pair, as the wrong shoe can lead to injury and pain," says Mairead, who recommends having both feet measured for size. "If one foot is bigger, go for the bigger size and add an insole to the smaller foot," she says. As a general rule, try shoes on for 10 minutes to be sure they're comfortable and replace them every 800km or four months if walking most days.

## Change your mind

Brisk walking can be good for the ageing brain. In a study of mild cognitive impairment and exercise, middle-aged and older people with memory loss raised their cognitive scores after they started walking frequently.



Fitbit Charge 4, \$179.95 (top), and Versa 2, \$299.95.

## How should I train for an upcoming walking holiday?

"Start training at least two months before you plan walking eight hours a day, to get you fit, break in walking shoes, test clothes, and figure out what fuel makes you feel best," says Ben Lucas, Director of Flow Athletic (flowathletic.com.au). "Increasing stamina is built up by walking, adding distance when you can. But you need to build muscles and posture too. Often we have a dominant leg that does more work, but over eight hours that can lead to sore hip flexors, knees and lower back. Reformer Pilates is a great way to build leg strength, or talk to a trainer about a workout that includes walking lunges, one-leg squats and one-leg deadlifts. You also want to do exercises that promote good posture, such as rowing and push-ups. The longer you walk, the more likely you are to slouch and that's why it's a good idea to strengthen those muscles. On the trip, pack magnesium cream and powder, compression tights and Epson salts for a bath, all which can provide muscle relief. And eat nutrient-rich food to replenish any you may lose during the day."



### Health STEPS

## Embrace tech

Do you know how many steps you take each day? The average Australian takes about 7400, just shy of the number researchers say makes a real difference. For instance, a 2015 study demonstrated each 1000-step increase per day reduced the risk of premature death by 6 per cent, and those taking 10,000 or more steps have a 46 per cent lower risk. "This guideline is not going to be right for every person," says Mairead. "But be as active as you can." Most phones have apps to track steps, as does a FitBit. Aim for a small increase in your steps each week of about 20 per cent, for instance by parking several blocks from work, taking the stairs more often and dog walking.

## How to take a meditative walk

We often collate mental to-do lists, talk on the phone or listen to music and podcasts while we walk. But to feel truly refreshed, techniques to quiet your mind may help.



### Listen in

The mindfulness app Calm is well known for offering guided relaxation sessions for all levels, but we love the walking meditations that blend exercise with stress reduction.



### Be present

According to headspace.com (a great resource for relaxation), one of the simplest ways to get out of your head is to notice how your body feels as you walk. Contemplate your gait. Tune into sights and sounds around you. And as your mind drifts, return to these observations.



### Think big

"Setting intentions when we walk can help us remember that we have some control around our choices and their outcomes," says Dr Allen. For example, "I intend to see the goodness around me," or "I intend to say what I mean". "The forward movement of walking always leaves me feeling confident that I can fulfil my intentions."

## Dress the part

Turn your daily stroll into a more meaningful workout by putting on workout gear that shifts your mind into fitness mode.

### Layers

A raincoat worn over a warm base layer is essential for winter walking. TRY: lululemon Rain Rebel Jacket, \$249.



**Leggings**  
Technical fabrics wick moisture and reduce chafing. TRY: P.E Nation All Rounder Leggings, \$129.



**Trainers**  
You don't need to rush out and buy brand new shoes, but you do need a comfortable, supportive and closed-toe pair. TRY: Adidas Originals Marimekko NMD\_R1, \$220.



**Accessories**  
Listen to tunes that encourage a faster pace, and drink plenty of H2O. TRY: Beats By Dr. Dre Wireless Earphones, \$349.95. Frank Green Ceramic Reusable Bottle, \$49.95.



**Sports bra**  
Reduce uncomfortable shifting and bouncing that can be a disincentive to step up the pace when you walk. TRY: Nimble Activewear Circuit Breaker Bra, \$79.