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# JUST WALK ...

## 12 Full

## Benefits

## Walking

SUNDAY OCTOBER 30<sup>TH</sup>, 2021



One of the most powerful ways to maintain a healthy weight, stay strong, and live longer is so shockingly simple, even a toddler can do it. All you have to do is put one foot in front of the other. “Walking has always been my main source of cardio, and except for when I was pregnant, I’ve been the same weight my entire life!” says fitness expert Denise Austin. The key is to strut for, ideally, at least 30 minutes a day, says Melina B. Jampolis, M.D., author of The Doctor on Demand Diet. And whether you decide to lace up your sneakers and walk to work, pair up with a friend, or join a hiking club, research shows that walking can do everything from lower your blood pressure and reduce your risk of chronic diseases to making your brain sharper and your heart happier.

Walking is simple enough that nearly any able-bodied person can do it. “Plus it has tremendous benefits, from supporting a healthy immune system to boosting your metabolism to strengthening your joints, muscles, and bones—not to mention it’s amazing for stress relief and enjoying a little ‘me time,’” says Austin. Here’s what else you can expect when you start walking for just a half hour—that’s less time than it takes to listen to one music album!—most days of the week

## **1. Walking will improve your mood**

A glass of wine or a square (or three) of dark chocolate can blunt the edge of a rough day—but going for a walk is a zero-calorie strategy that offers the same perk, says Dr. Jampolis. In fact, research shows that just 10 minutes of walking can lift your spirits. The effect may be amplified even more if you take a stroll through some greenery.

“Research shows that regular walking actually modifies your nervous system so much that you’ll experience a decrease in anger and hostility,” she says, especially when you’re going for a stroll through some greenery or soaking in a bit of sunlight. This can be particularly helpful during the colder months, when seasonal depression spikes.

Finally, when you make your walks social—you stride with, say, your partner, a neighbor, or a good friend—that interaction helps you feel connected, says Dr. Jampolis, which can make you feel happier.

## **2. It will help you burn calories and maintain a healthy weight.**

“As you continue to walk, you may notice your pants begin to fit more loosely around your midsection, even if the number on the scale isn’t moving much,” says Dr. Jampolis. That’s because regular walking can help reduce belly fat and, as a result, improve your body’s response to insulin, according to research.

Itching to up your calorie burn? When walking outside, plan a route that includes hills, alternate between speed walking and a slower pace, and challenge yourself to walk the same routes on different days to see if you can beat your previous times, says Austin. For an extra boost of motivation, she also recommends aiming to hit 10,000 steps a day.

“Daily walking increases metabolism by burning extra calories and by preventing muscle loss, which is particularly important as we get older,” says Ariel Iasevoli, a personal trainer at Crunch gyms in New York City.

The best part? You don’t have to slog it out on a treadmill at the gym to see these benefits. “One of my clients reduced her body fat by 2% in just one month by walking home from work each day, which was just under a mile,” she says.

Intervals are key here, says Michele Stanten, a walking coach and author of Prevention’s Walk Your Way to Better Health.

Increasing your speed for small bouts of time during, say, a 30-minute walk allows you to burn more calories than if you strolled at a moderate pace for half an hour. It also benefits your cardiorespiratory system. To try adding intervals, warm up for 3 minutes. Then spend 25 minutes alternating between 1 minute of walking almost as fast as you can go and 1 minute of brisk walking (aiming for a 6 on an intensity scale of 1 to 10). Cool down for 2 minutes.

### **3. Walking can reduce your risk of Chronic Disease**

“The physical benefits of walking are well documented,” says Scott Danberg, director of fitness at Pritikin Longevity Center + Spa in Miami.

The American Diabetes Association recommends walking to lower blood sugar levels and your overall risk for diabetes. Some research even shows that for every 1,000 daily steps you take, you could lower your systolic blood pressure by .45 points. That means if you clock in 10,000 daily steps, your systolic blood pressure is likely to be 2.25 points lower than someone else who walks only 5,000 daily steps.

One of the most cited studies on walking and health, published in The New England Journal of Medicine, found that those who walked enough to meet physical activity guidelines had a 30% lower risk of cardiovascular events (like heart attack or stroke) compared with those who did not walk regularly.

For disease prevention, longer walks are key. Stanten recommends doing one hour-long walk at least once or twice a week.

#### **4. It can even help you live longer.**

Seriously! And it doesn't take much to get results. In fact, one study found that people who did just 10 to 59 minutes of moderate exercise (like brisk walking) per week had an 18% lower risk of death during the study period compared to those who were inactive. Meanwhile, people who completed the recommended 150 minutes of weekly exercise in at least 10-minute spurts had a 31% lower risk of death. Other research shows the faster you walk, the more your risk drops. The benefit may come from the cardiorespiratory workout that walking provides.

#### **5. Walking boosts brainpower.**

The research here is quickly growing. In one study, brain scans of people who walked briskly for one hour three times a week showed the decision-making areas of their brains worked more efficiently than people who attended education seminars instead. Other research shows that when kids spent 20 minutes walking on a treadmill, their performance on academic tests improved. Experts think these benefits could be due in part to increased blood flow to the brain that occurs with exercise.

#### **6. It can help alleviate joint pain.**

Contrary to what you might think, pounding pavement can help improve your range of motion and mobility because walking increases blood flow to tense areas and helps strengthen the muscles surrounding your joints.

In fact, research shows that walking for at least 10 minutes a day—or about an hour every week—can stave off disability and arthritis pain in older adults. A 2019 study in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine followed 1,564 adults older than 49 with lower-body joint pain. Participants who walked for an hour each week were more likely to remain disability-free four years later.

#### **7. Walking can even delay the onset of varicose veins.**

As you age, your risk of varicose veins increases. However, walking is a proven way to prevent them from developing, says Luis Navarro, M.D., founder and director of The Vein Treatment Center in New York City. “The venous system includes a circulatory section known as ‘the second heart,’ which is formed by muscles, veins, and valves located in our calf and foot,” he explains. “This system works to push blood back up to the heart and lungs—and walking strengthens this secondary circulatory system by strengthening and preserving leg muscle, which boosts healthy blood flow.”





## **8. It may stimulate your digestive system.**

If you currently praise coffee for keeping your digestive system going strong, get ready to start thanking your morning walk instead. That's because a regular walking routine can greatly improve your bowel movements, says Tara Alaichamy, D.P.T., a physical therapist at Cancer Treatment Centers of America.

"One of the very first things an abdominal surgery patient is required to do is to walk because it utilizes core and abdominal muscles, encouraging movement in our GI system," she says.

## **9. Walking enhances creativity.**

Whether you're feeling stuck at work or you've been searching for a solution to a tricky problem, research shows it's a good idea to get moving: According to a 2014 study in the Journal of Experimental Psychology, Learning, Memory, and Cognition, going for a walk can spark creativity.

"Researchers administered creative-thinking tests to subjects while seated and while walking and found that the walkers thought more creatively than the sitters," says Dr. Jampolis.

**10. It can also improve your sleep.**


If you work out regularly, you'll sleep better at night. That's because sleep naturally boosts the effects of melatonin, the sleep hormone. A 2019 study from Sleep found that postmenopausal women who do light to moderate intensity physical activity snooze better at night than those who are sedentary. Walking also helps reduce pain and stress, which can cause sleep disturbances.

**11. Walking will kickstart your immune system.**

These days we're all looking for ways to improve our immunity, and walking seems to be a smart strategy. Research shows that moderate-intensity exercise—and walking in particular—ramps up our immune system. It increases the number of immune cells that attack pathogens in our body, which lowers our risk of becoming seriously ill from infectious diseases. Not only that, if you do get sick, research has found that people who walk more spend less time in the hospital.

**12. Last but not least, other goals will seem more reachable when you have a walking routine.**

When you become a regular walker, you will have established a regular routine—and when you have a routine, you are more likely to continue with the activity and take on new healthy behaviors. “I firmly believe that walking regularly can help you to accomplish other goals you set your mind to,” says Kim Evans, a personal trainer and daily walker.

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