

FOR YOUR HEALTH:

WALKING

At a competitive extreme, walking is a track event. At the casual end of things, it's a surprisingly effective strategy for lifelong health.

Walking has an unlikely virtue its inefficiency. If you want to work major muscle groups, get your blood pumping, and take in oxygen, then efficiency is not your first priority. Studies show that walkers traveling faster than five miles an hour actually burn twice as many calories as runners going the same speed.

GETTING STARTED.

To begin a walking program, keep in mind that you're in no big hurry. This is lifetime health, not overnight magic. For now, forget stopwatches, heart rates, and technique. Just go for a walk at a comfortable pace slightly above a stroll. 15 to 30 minutes would be nice. (If you are over 45 and this is your first step toward fitness, check with a physician first.)

BEYOND STROLLING.

MEASURE YOUR TIME. Start by timing how long it takes you to walk a mile comfortably on flat ground. Chances are it'll take between 15 and 20 minutes.

That's your starting capacity build from there.

MEASURE SEVERAL COURSES.

Use your car's odometer or the rule of ten city blocks to a mile to measure different routes. (Why walk the same path every time?) Two miles per course is enough for a start.

MEASURE YOUR INTENSITY.

The recommendation for a "training heart rate" is 60 to 90 percent of the fastest your heart can beat in a minute. Figure your maximum heart rate by subtracting your age in years from 220. Multiply the result by 0.6 and 0.9 to get the bottom and top of your target zone for aerobic training.

SET YOUR FREQUENCY.

The goal is three to five times a week, with a heart rate in your target zone for 15 to 60 minutes. Schedule your walks in advance, and keep the appointment.

GO.

The proper technique is not as important as getting out there and doing something. Keep in mind that healthy people are well overall their activities help fend off heart disease and circulatory problems.

The key is to stay active.

KEEP IT UP.

To make walking a habit takes willpower-and sometimes a strategy. Schedule regular walks with a friend if you need an extra push, or walk first thing in the morning before other commitments crop up, or vary your route to keep it interesting, or get a dog. Finally, don't think of it as exercise. It's time you've set aside for yourself. Enjoy it.

WHAT TO WEAR.

All you really need is a good pair of walking shoes. Choose a pair with a firm heel cup for stability, a rocker sole to enhance a smooth heel-to-toe motion and plenty of room for toes so they can spread out as they push off. Wear loose, comfortable clothes.