

Preparing for a Long-Distance Walk

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- 1. Introduction/Six Months Before the Event

If you are like most people, sticking to a weight loss program can be a "heavy" burden. Trying to squeeze in your fitness walks between job, family and social commitments can become impossible--unless you make it a top priority in your life. One way of doing so is by setting for yourself a concrete, long-range goal. For many walkers, deciding to complete a long race, cause walk or charity walk in May or June is an excellent way of motivating them through the rough spots in February. And it makes that training--and losing weight--more fun.

Finishing a long cause or charity walk is a reasonable goal for most walkers. Causes and charities such as the American Cancer Society, the Leukemia Society, the March of Dimes, and Amnesty International hold frequent walks to raise money or awareness. These walks can range from 10 kilometers--about six miles--to 20 miles or more.

If you've been walking using proper racewalking technique, you may want to consider training for a 10 to 20 kilometer judged racewalk instead of a charity walk. In any case, pick a goal distance that fits your current level of fitness. You may want to consider shooting for a shorter walk--something in the 10 kilometer range if you are just beginning your walking program. If you're comfortable with walking 30 to 45 minutes per day at least five days per week, aim for a 10 mile to 20 kilometer event. If you've been walking for at least a year and are walking 45 to 60 minutes, 6 to 7 days per week, you can safely begin training for a longer charity walk or race, or--for the truly ambitious--even a 26 mile marathon.

Whatever distance you choose for your target event, think of your training as long-term commitment. Increasing endurance involves changes in the cellular structure of your muscles, and this doesn't happen overnight. After picking a target event, make a firm commitment to walking 5 to 6 days per week for the next 4 to 6 months to fully prepare yourself.

If you intend to walk a 10 kilometer charity walk, you'll have to build up to walking continuously for at least 1 hour during some of your training walks, because you'll be walking for 90 minutes or more during your event. If you've chosen to train for a 10 mile walk, you'll want to build up to walking 2 hours in training because your event could take up to 2 1/2 hours, and if you want to finish a marathon you'll want to be comfortable walking up to 3 1/2 hours in training because you'll be on your feet for 5 to 6 hours or more during your event.

- 2. Six to Four Months Before the Event--Preparatory Phase

A great way of staying motivated is by sharing your goal and training with a friend or group of friends. Many charity walks sponsor local training groups, which can provide both camaraderie and moral support. Many of these groups also publish helpful newsletters and retain qualified coaches to help you schedule your workouts.

Jeff Salvage, coach of the Eastern Pennsylvania Leukemia Society Team in Training, and of the Philadelphia Area Striders (PHAST) racewalk team encourages his walkers to call for an entry form and send in their check as soon as possible to show their commitment.

"I have my walkers choose an ambitious, but realistic long-term goal, then mark the date on their calendars," says Salvage. "Just the act of telling friends and coworkers of your plans, and putting that race or charity walk

on the calendar goes a long way toward maintaining focus over the course of a 4 to 6 month training program."

Once you've committed to your goal, how do you begin training? In general, your primary focus in the first few months will be building up to regular walks of between 20 and 60 minutes four to five days per week, with an additional long, fat burning walk at a comfortable pace on the weekend. Regardless of your goals or current fitness level, you shouldn't increase the number of minutes you walk per week, or the duration of your long day by more than 10% to get to these levels. Also, you should always recover from any particularly long or fast walk with an easy recovery day.

Your present weight and weight loss goals, and your activity level will dictate how vigorously you will be able to train at the outset, but wherever you are you should try to walk at a brisk 3.5 to 4 mph pace to ensure a high caloric burn level. For further training information see side-bar.

- 3. Four Months to Six Weeks Before the Event--Endurance Phase

After a few months of preparatory work you can now begin to train more specifically for your long walk. The main focus of this period is an increase in the duration of your long walk to build endurance and to strengthen your muscles for the faster walking that will come later. The rules haven't changed--continue walking at a brisk pace to burn more calories, alternate hard and easy days, and don't add more than 10% to your weekly walking time or the duration of your long-day. If you are now walking 1 hour on your long day, increase to 66 minutes, then to 72, and so on. You should be able to walk continuously for 2 hours by the end of this period.

Keeping a training diary is a great way of staying motivated through your endurance phase. Writing down your daily workouts--the time and pace of your walks, where you walked, and how you felt--will help you to keep track of your accomplishments. Also, keep track of changes in weight and body-fat percentage to help keep yourself motivated. You will undoubtedly be seeing some weight loss progress, but remember that the muscle you are adding weighs more than fat--concentrate on losing fat not weight!

By now your consistent walking has probably taken a toll on your shoes. Be good to your feet and buy a new pair of shoes if you notice any breakdown in the midsole or excessive wear on the outsole of your old shoes. Look for a proper fitting shoe that offers both stability in the rear and flexibility in the forefoot.

- 4. Six Weeks to One Week Before the Event--Sharpening

Once you've built a solid endurance base, you can begin slowly cutting back the mileage of your long day by 10% per week, and focus a bit more on speed. By walking faster about 2 days per week you teach your muscles to work at a higher intensity level without fatiguing. Don't push all-out,--just pick up the pace to the point where you can still say a few words at a time to your training partner without gasping for breath. Walking on hills a few days per week is another great way to increase your breathing and heart rates, and it will build strong calf muscles to help you push through the later stages of your long event.

With the increased intensity of your walks, you may experience some muscle soreness or tightness. Remember to stretch your calves, the front and back of your thighs, and your lower back after every walk, and take an aspirin/ibuprofen or two for pain if necessary.

- 5. One Week Before the Event--Tapering

It's important to "taper" in the final week before your long walk. To feel fresh and rested on the big day, you should cut your total walking time by 1/3 to 1/2 in the final week, while maintaining the same speed. You don't want to rest completely or slow down the pace of your walking or you may feel tight and sluggish the day of your long walk. If you usually walk 45 minutes on hills on Tuesdays, do 30 minutes on hills. If you usually do a fast 20 minutes on Fridays, do a fast 10 minutes instead.

In addition to sharpening your training for the big event, you should also be putting some thought into logistics. Decide what time you will leave, who will be driving, where you will park, and so on.

A trial run will help you to finalize your plans. Try completing one of your last long workouts on the course to test out your event-day plan, and to learn what kind of terrain you will encounter during your long walk. Pack everything you will take on the event day, and head out early enough to get you to the site at your required time. Once there, warm up and stretch as usual, then walk the course noting any hills, rough spots on the pavement and anything else that may affect your goal walk.

- 6. 24 Hours to Go

You've been eagerly focusing on your long walk for several months now--don't "blow it" by hurting yourself attempting a new stretch or by trying the latest fad diet the day before your walk. Michelle Rohl, 1992 Olympian and American record holder in the 10 km racewalk, suggests not altering your routine the day before the event:

"Whether it's the Olympics or a low-key local walk, I try not to make any major changes in my lifestyle before a race," says Rohl, a mother of two toddlers. "I may be a bit more careful with what I eat, but being a mommy 24 hours a day keeps me from trying anything too different. I feel a lot more relaxed treating every race as if it were just another training walk."

Many walkers avoid training the day before an event, but there is really no reason to take off completely. The idea is to balance the need to be rested with the equally important need to be "loose." Many walkers find that their muscles tighten up if not used. An easy 10 to 30 minute stroll the day before the big event--followed by some gentle stretching--will leave you feeling fresh and ready to go.

Most walkers eat a high-carbohydrate meal like rice or pasta before a long walk to load their muscles with fuel, but remember; no major changes. Don't overeat, simply cut out unnecessary fat calories--which you no doubt have been doing all along.

If at all possible, pick up your number and registration packet the day before the event. Pin your number to your shirt and make sure that the clothes you will wear during the event fit properly--you've probably lost a lot of weight since your last outing! And don't overdress. Even if it's a bit chilly the morning of the race, as soon as you begin walking you'll wish you weren't wearing those heavy sweat pants!

Get to bed at a reasonable hour, but try not to go to sleep much earlier than usual--pre-event jitters may prevent you from falling a sleep right away if you try to bed down too much earlier than usual. Just relax, it's going to be fun and you're going to do great!

- 7. The Big Day

Now that the big day is finally here, how do you prepare for your long walk? Herm Nelson, 1992 Olympian in the 50 kilometer racewalk suggests arriving at least 60 minutes before the race to allow plenty of time for registration and for mental and physical warm ups. "After months of hard training," says Herm, "the last thing you want to do is show up at the starting line stressed-out because you're still tying your shoes and pinning your number on when the gun goes off."

Here are some pre-race tips from Herm, and other top walkers:

- Have a very light, carbohydrate-rich meal, such as dry toast, and a Powerbar or a piece of fruit 2 to 4 hours before your walk.
- Drink plenty of fluids before you start, and about 8 ounces every 15 minutes during your event to stay

hydrated. If available, carbohydrate drinks can give you a much-needed energy boost during your walk.

- Plan on arriving at least one hour before the event to allow time to register, use the bathroom, warm up and check your "equipment" before the start.
- Pack a small fanny pack with "emergency supplies" to carry with you during your walk. A bit of extra Vaseline to prevent chafing, Band-Aids in case of blisters, extra batteries if you're wearing a walkman, extra toilet paper "just in case," etc.
- Once the walk starts, don't go out to fast. Walking a bit slower in the early miles will allow you to begin burning more fat than carbohydrates. In addition to the obvious benefits, this will prevent carbohydrate depletion which could make you "hit the wall" in the later stages of the race.
- After you've finished, don't stop immediately. If possible, walk very slowly for a few minutes to "cool down," then gently stretch your major muscle groups to help ward off muscles soreness. Taking an aspirin/ibuprofen or two will help to ease pain and prevent swelling in your muscles.
- After a few days, evaluate your accomplishments. How much weight did you lose? Was the event and the training enjoyable? Are you ready to set a new goal? If so, set a new weight loss target and pick another long-term walking target to help you get there.

Training for a long walk several months down the road may well provide the motivational boost you've been looking for. In addition to burning lots of calories, making your training a priority in your life adds focus--and fun--to your weight loss plan.

Training For Your Event

How do you find out where events are held?

There are a number of different organizations that host charity or cause walks in cities throughout the United States. For information on these events, contact Walking Magazine at:

9-11 Harcourt Street

Boston, MA 02116

(800) 266-3312

In many cases local running clubs will include a separate walking category in their marathons and shorter races. For race information, contact your local running club, or USA Track & Field at:

1 RCA Dome Suite 140

Indianapolis, IN 46225

(317) 261-0500

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