

# Are You Walking Fast Enough?

From December '96 Walking Magazine

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Do your family and co-workers complain that you walk too fast? Have you noticed that strangers no longer interrupt your daily walks to ask for directions? Or do you find yourself wishing there were passing lanes in the supermarket aisles? These may all be good signs that you've upped the intensity of your walking--and though your dog may hide under the bed when you take out his leash now, research shows that there are tangible health benefits to upping the rate of your gait at least a few times per week.

A recent JAMA report concluded that moderately fit men and women had considerably lower death rates from cardiovascular disease (CVD) than less-fit individuals--even if the fit subjects smoked, or had high cholesterol or blood pressure. And the benefits of exercise were proven to be even greater in highly-fit individuals. Increasing the intensity of your walking, then, can actually add years to your life.

So how do you know you're walking fast enough to reap these proven health benefits? Certainly walking every day on a cardiologist's EKG-monitored treadmill is effective, but it's far from practical. Here are 7 easy ways to know that you're walking with sufficient intensity to increase your fitness:

- 1.) Get "In the Zone."

According to the experts, an energy expenditure of 700 to 2,000 calories per week is necessary to produce major health benefits. You can achieve this goal by walking 20 to 60 minutes, three to five days per week at an intensity of between 60 and 80% of your maximum heart rate.

To be sure, monitoring heart rate is the most accurate way to gauge your walking intensity. And determining your heart rate is easy--just take your pulse or wear a heart rate monitor. But (The trick is) finding your maximum heart rate can be tricky. Many walkers use the old "220 or 226 minus your age" formulas, but according to Dr. Lenny Kaminsky at the Ball State University, these estimates may be up to 15 beats high or low for about 1/3 of population--the only way to truly determine maximum heart rate is to push yourself to maximum, preferably under a doctor's supervision.

But what if a visit to the cardiologist is not in your plans? Fear not--there are a number of other ways to know you're "in the zone."

- 2.) Make the effort. Exercise physiologists at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs use expensive respiratory gas and blood lactate analyzers and EKG machines to determine how hard their athletes are working. They also use a remarkably low-tech method that they swear is nearly as effective. Technicians simply ask athletes to describe how they feel. The athletes respond using a numerical scale of 6 - 20, with each number corresponding to a "rating of perceived exertion" (RPE)--6 being very easy, 20 being extremely difficult. According to Olympic Training Center Physiologist, J. T. Kearney, walkers will be getting a good workout if they're working at an RPE of about 11 to 13; corresponding to a "somewhat hard" feeling.

- 3.) Count your steps.

According to biomechanist Leonard Jansen, most walkers maintain a relatively consistent stride length even as they walk faster. "So don't get hung up on stride length," says Jansen. "It's easier to increase the speed, and

therefore the intensity of your walks by jacking up your stride frequency." To get an indication of how hard you're working, Jansen suggests counting each left or right footfall for 1 minute, then multiplying by two. For the average walker, 100-110 strides per minute is a leisurely stroll, 120-130 a moderate workout, and over 140-150 a real effort.

- 4.) Heavy Breathing.

Your working muscles require more oxygen as you walk faster, so as you pick up the pace you'll breathe harder and faster. If you're breathing noticeably--without panting--you're probably getting a good workout. Also, most people tend to walk with a set pattern to their breathing. For example, you may inhale for three strides, then exhale for three strides; a 3-3 rhythm. Your breathing rate will increase "in step" with your stride rate until you begin to really work. Then you'll require lots of oxygen and may suddenly switch over to a 2-2 rhythm. Taking note of these "rhythm changes" is another good way of telling that you're getting a healthy workout.

- 5.) Time your walks.

Simply timing and recording how long it takes you to walk on measured courses is one of the easiest ways to gauge your intensity. Obviously it takes less time to walk a given distance the faster you walk. By timing your daily walks and recording the results in a journal or "training log" you'll not only push yourself to walk faster, but according to many motivational experts, you'll be more likely to stick to your walking program.

- 6.) Hook up with a "fast woman"--or man.

According to Jeff Salvage, Coach of the Philadelphia Area Striders (PHAST) walking club, finding a faster training partner is another great way to get yourself moving, and a great way to keep both of you motivated.

Your local walking club is a great place to find a suitable partner, but if you can't find a club in your area, "Start your own," suggests Salvage. "There are probably plenty of lonely walkers out there looking for partners."

- 7.) Walk with faster technique.

If you walk with plodding, inefficient technique you might not be able to walk quickly enough to get a good workout. Bending your elbows at about 90 degrees; taking shorter, faster steps; walking with good relaxed posture; and pushing off strongly with your toes are all ways to increase your efficiency, making it easier to turn your walk into a more intense, healthier workout.

(Lots o' cool graphics in original)

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