

How to Walk with Proper Form and Technique for Fitness

(Spark People)

Here are some walking basics that will help keep your walking workouts safe and effective by building your walking technique from the ground up.

Think "Heel to Toe"

Comfortable and efficient walking begins with a good foot strike, which allows your ankle to move through its complete range of motion. Here's how to do it properly.

1. Step forward landing squarely on the heel of your foot.
2. Roll forward onto the ball of the foot.
3. Raise the heel and push off with your big toe.

As the heel of your front foot is striking, you are being propelled forward by your back foot, pushing off the ground. Unlike a running stride, your feet should never lift off the ground completely when walking.

To get an idea of how this heel-to-toe motion should feel, try sitting on a chair with your legs extended straight out in front of you, toes pointing straight up to the ceiling. With your left foot, bring your toes back toward you so your heel is extended and your foot is flexed; with your right foot, push your toes forward as if pushing on the air with the ball of your foot and big toe. Then slowly reverse the positions of your feet, moving back and forth several times for one minute. This is the ideal motion for walking. But because most of us don't walk perfectly, you may feel some burning or tension in your shins or calves. This means that those muscles (where you feel the soreness) are underused, and you may need to do some strengthening and stretching exercises so that walk as close to perfect heel-to-toe form as possible.

Find Your Stride

Everyone has a natural stride length that is most comfortable, and it may be shorter or longer than someone else's stride. One of the most common mistakes you can make with fitness walking is to increase the length of your strides in order to walk faster. That's OK for running, not walking, as over-striding can strain your muscles and joints, causing pain in the arches of your feet, and your knees, hips and heels. If you want to walk faster, focus on taking more steps per minute, not taking longer steps.

How fast should you walk? It depends on your fitness level, stride length, and turnover rate. Here are some general guidelines:

- Slow to moderate walking is a 3 to 3.5 to mph pace (17-20 minutes per mile), about 115-120 steps per minute.
- Brisk walking is about a 4 mph pace (15 minutes per mile), about 135 steps per minute.

- Fast walking (or jogging) starts at a 5 mph pace (12 minutes per mile), which is about 160 steps per minute. Most people cannot walk at this pace. It's usually easier and more efficient to jog than it is to walk once you work up to this speed.

Walk the (Straight) Line

Be aware of your posture: Stand as tall as possible, feet pointing forward, abs engaged, back straight, neck in line with your shoulders (not forward), head up, and eyes gazing about 10 feet ahead of you. When walking, your center of gravity to move forward, not side-to-side (known as hip sway). Your pelvis will rotate forward with each step, but should not *turn* from side to side. Try to keep your legs in line with your hips and toes pointing forward, not inward (pigeon-toed) or outward (duck-toed).

Pump It Up—Your Arms, That Is

You've probably seen those “serious” fitness walkers who pump their arms vigorously as if they were running. Even if it makes you feel self-conscious, this is the most efficient way to walk—especially at higher speeds. When your arms are too straight, it can be difficult (even painful) to pump them enough to achieve a good speed. And if your hands swell during exercise, keeping your elbows bent can help avoid or minimize that.

Keep your arms close to your sides and bend your elbows at 90 degrees. Keep them bent at a right angle while you walk. When pumping your arms, the movement should come from your shoulders, not your elbows, and your hands shouldn't rise higher than chest level. Finally, avoid clenching your hands. Imagine you're carrying something delicate in them, like a raw egg—don't squeeze tight enough to break it, nor so loose that you drop it. Try not to exaggerate the movement of your arms, but do use them to your advantage. You can only walk as fast as your arms pump.

Take to the Hills

There's a natural tendency to lean forward when walking uphill and lean backward when walking downhill. However, leaning can put a lot of strain on your back, and should be avoided when possible. So what's a walker to do? Remember your cues for posture and form. Maintain your posture as upright as possible, especially on mild and moderate hills. Steep declines may require slight leaning, but be careful not to put too much weight in your heels, which can cause your feet to slip out from under you on loose terrain. When walking up an incline, push upward and forward with your toes, pumping your arms to help you. When walking downhill, relax your knees a little bit to absorb some of the extra impact.

The 8 Keys to Proper Fitness Walking

And you thought walking was simple! There are a lot of things to keep in mind. This quick list summarizes the info above so you can get out there and put one foot in front of the other!

1. Stand tall, with your shoulders back, head and neck aligned with your spine, and abs pulled in.

2. Push off with the toes of your rear foot, and land squarely on the heel of your lead foot.
3. Roll through the entire foot, from heel strike to the ball of your foot to the final push off with your toes, allowing your ankle to move through its full range of motion.
4. Avoid over-striding. Increase the number of steps per minute to increase speed.
5. Bend elbows at a right angle, and swing your arms from the shoulder, keeping elbows close to your sides.
6. Avoid clenching hands or over-swinging your arms.
7. Minimize leaning on hills.

Don't neglect stretching and strength training, especially if you experience burning or tightness in shins or calve muscles.