Keeping Walks Fun and Effective

If you walk regularly for exercise, putting one foot in front of the other day after day can get monotonous. Walking the same route at the same pace may keep you fit, but you could easily become bored with your fitness routine and give it up.

The following suggestions will add variety to your walking workout and keep you going strong mile after mile. According to the American College of Sports Medicine, you should check with your doctor before beginning an exercise program, or before increasing the length or intensity of your current exercise program, if you meet any of the following criteria:

- Male and over the age of 45.
- Female and over the age of 55 (or less than 55 years old and past menopause, but not taking estrogen).
- Have a family history of any male family member died of a heart attack before age 55? Or, female family member died of a heart attack before age 65.
- Smoke cigarettes
- Have been told you have high blood pressure; your blood pressure been measured more than once at greater than 140 over 90; or, you take high blood pressure medicine.
- Have been told that you have high cholesterol (over 200); or, your HDL cholesterol less than 35.
- Consider yourself physically inactive at work and during leisure time.

Change your route

You can change your route by turning a different direction than you normally do when leaving your door. You can also drive to a different neighborhood and walk a loop back to your car. If you usually walk on city streets, call your city's park and recreation department and request information on area walking routes and trails in nearby state or national parks.

Change your pace

Varying your pace can make your walks more interesting because it requires more concentration. You can shake things up by: walking fast one day, a bit slower the next; or by walking at a moderate pace for 5 minutes, faster for 10 minutes, then slowly for 5 minutes.

Change your goals

Try focusing on increasing your distance if you've been working to increase your speed. Try walking at a faster pace to pump up your cardiovascular conditioning if you've been walking at a moderate pace to lose weight. Set a goal if you don't have one. For example: Try to walk 40 miles a month or 240 miles in six months. Tracking your progress will give every walk a purpose.

Be sure not to increase the length or intensity of your walk by more than 10% each week-doing so can strain your muscles and joints and cause overuse injuries.

Walk with a gadget

Walking with a heart-rate monitor, walking poles or a pedometer can add interest to your walk.

Walking with a heart-rate monitor can show you how fast you must go to reach your target heart rate.

Walking poles add an upper-body workout to your walk and can change your body mechanics by using different muscle groups. If you've never used them, use them for a short part of your walks for a few weeks; gradually increase the time you use them.

You can compete against your personal best for time and speed when you walk with a pedometer. Track each day's time and pace data in a workout log, then see if you can beat the previous record.

Listen to music or books on tape as you walk.

Enter a race

Many metropolitan areas have charity walks and fun runs that welcome walkers. Watch for race information in your city's newspaper.

Walk a dog

Dogs offer companionship, a deterrent to criminals and a good reason to stick with your regular routine. Keep the dog on a strong leash and, if the dog has been sedentary, start out with slow, short excursions. Gradually increase the length, duration and pace of your walks with the animal over four to six weeks.

Make it a social event

Walk with a club. Many walkers' clubs sponsor nature walks in city parks, mall walks in area shopping malls and walks to historical sites in metropolitan areas. Watch for announcements of club activities in your newspaper's entertainment guide. You could try walking with a friend rather than having coffee and bagel.

Walk like a kid

Hop over sticks and other obstacles in your path, jump from one stepping stone to another, walk backward or in a zig-zag pattern, leap across puddles or skip for a while. Improve your balance by walking along a curb or fallen log. Add fun to your walk, and your workout will cease to be a chore-it'll be an adventure. Find something new during each walk – new plants, animals, textures, and color.

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