

Walking

“Walking is man’s best medicine.”
– Hippocrates



INTRODUCTION

What is it that makes walking so special? For starters, of all the creatures that have four limbs, only humans walk on two legs for a living. Walking is such an efficient method of locomotion that bushmen in the Kalahari Desert can chase a kudu for 20 miles in the heat of the day until the poor animal overheats and collapses from exhaustion. And the bushmen's job is only just beginning – they still have to carry the meat back to the village, for everyone to enjoy, making sure they won't themselves become another predator's lunch on the way.

But that is not what I mean here. The simplicity of walking as an exercise, and its effect on our health, is what makes it the best exercise we can have, by far, in many ways. All you have to do is get up and walk. That's it. You don't need any special equipment, you don't need to make appointments or be on schedule in the yoga class session, and you don't need to be particularly physically fit; you turn the knob yourself to determine how hard you want to walk. You can live anywhere and be of any age to walk.

We saw earlier in the book how Mandela and others rescued their health. They all had one thing in common – they made walking a part of the rescue recovery plan.

Charles Dickens famously walked for hours daily to fuel his creativity and gather inspiration for his books. Dickens was a notorious walker, often covering 10–20 miles a day through London's streets (his biographer Peter Ackroyd notes he

walked at a "furious" pace). He treated these walks as immersive research, observing people's quirks, eavesdropping on conversations, and absorbing the city's atmosphere to populate his novels with his vivid characters. This habit wasn't just practical; it was therapeutic. In an 1860 letter, Dickens wrote, "If I couldn't walk far and fast, I think I should just explode and perish."

Many famous people drew inspiration from walking to fuel their creativity. Darwin took long daily walks on a path near his home in Kent (which he called the Thinking Path or Sandwalk) during which he reflected deeply on his theories. Einstein said, "I walk to think". Richard Feynman emphasized physical movement as part of his creative process. Philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said, "I have walked myself into my best thoughts". Immanuel Kant walked every day at precisely the same time, so neighbors could set their watches by watching him.

Modern science backs this. Stanford researchers found walking boosts creative thinking by up to 60%. Walking works because it increases blood flow to the brain, reduces distractions, and encourages free association and mental clarity. In short, walking has long been a secret weapon of great minds for unlocking ideas.

Walking is my preferred exercise, but I don't use walking merely as an exercise. Walking is a time that can be used not only for physical advantage. Whenever I have a problem to solve, any problem, I go out for a walk. I walk, breathe in the

fresh air, and think about the issue. And the problem is usually resolved one way or another. I recall that when I was a student, some projects required a great deal of thought and consideration. I would never sit at home and think. I could calculate or draw, but to think about the project in general terms, I went out and walked, just like all the other great people. (It's good to know that I have something in common with them, even if it's only walking.)

I love walking so much that two or three times a year, I go on a hike for a few days in a row, doing nothing but walking, surrounded by nature. I come back energized with many pictures in my camera. My backpack is lighter, and so is my body. Life seems so much better after a few such days.

What is essential for us all is that walking can significantly improve overall health. Regular walking strengthens muscles, improves balance, and enhances cardiovascular health, all of which are crucial for maintaining independence in later life. According to the American Heart Association, even short, regular walks can reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke. Mentally, walking can boost mood and relieve symptoms of anxiety and depression, thanks to the release of endorphins, those feel-good chemicals in the brain. Additionally, walking outdoors can offer the added benefit of connecting with nature, which has a subtle yet positive effect on enhancing mental clarity and emotional well-being.

If you walk with friends (I usually walk alone, even on a multi-day hike), there is an additional positive side effect related to

social interactions with others. It can reduce feelings of loneliness at home and strengthen the bond between friends. It also helps to find new friends through others. Setting and achieving walking goals can instill a sense of accomplishment and boost self-esteem. For those concerned about joint health, walking is a low-impact exercise, making it an ideal way to maintain joint flexibility without the strain of more intense workouts.

To make walking more enjoyable and less of a mundane task, consider adding a purpose or theme to your walks. For instance, you could turn your stroll into a photo safari, capturing interesting sights or seasonal changes in your neighborhood. This not only makes the walk engaging but also helps you develop a creative eye and mindfulness. Another idea is to listen to audiobooks or podcasts while you walk. This can turn your walking time into both physical exercise and an opportunity for learning or entertainment, making the experience more rewarding.

To add variety to your walking, consider walking in a new place. Every time I have to drive somewhere (I don't drive that often these days, after I retired), I stop somewhere on the way to walk for one hour in a new place.

I always walk with my earbuds. As I learn a new language, I listen to podcasts in that language (currently Brazilian Portuguese), so the time I spend walking serves as a valuable lesson in language learning. I like to walk with a purpose. When I have to go to the library to return a book on Sunday, I

almost always walk through a park along a quiet street, then along the beach, and finally to the library. It takes 3/4 of an hour one way, so when I get back home, I have had 1 1/2 hours of walking.

Incorporating social elements is another fantastic way to enhance your walking routine. Organize a regular walking group with friends or join local community walking clubs. Walking with others can be a great way to catch up, share stories, and even motivate each other to keep going, especially on days when motivation is low. Additionally, sharing the experience can make the time pass more quickly.

If you have not walked regularly, here are some practical tips to get started:

- Start small: Begin with short walks, gradually increasing the distance as your comfort and endurance improve.
- Choose the right shoes: Invest in comfortable, supportive footwear to prevent injury and enhance the walking experience.
- Mix it up: Incorporate other exercises, like light stretching, to keep walks interesting and engaging.
- Stay safe: Walk in well-lit, familiar areas and carry a mobile phone for emergencies.
- Make it social: Invite a friend for a walk or join a walking group to add a social dimension.
- Add a soundtrack: Listen to music, podcasts, or

audiobooks to make the time more enjoyable.

- Change your pace: Try interval walking, alternating between brisk and leisurely paces.
- Explore new places: Venture to different parks or neighborhoods to keep things interesting.
- Change the surroundings often: If you have to drive somewhere, use this opportunity to go for a walk in a new place. This way, walking becomes more interesting.

USING MODERN TECHNOLOGY

Technology can be a fantastic ally in making your walking routine more engaging and effective. Firstly, fitness trackers and smartwatches are excellent tools for tracking your steps, distance, and even heart rate. Devices like Fitbit or Apple's Health app can offer insights into your daily activity levels, helping you set and achieve personal goals. These gadgets often come with friendly reminders to move if you've been sitting for too long, serving as a gentle nudge to get up and take a stroll.

If you're looking for a bit of a challenge, consider setting personal goals or participating in walking challenges. Apps like MapMyWalk or Strava not only record your route but also allow you to explore new paths and share your progress with friends. This adds a community aspect, where you can join challenges, compete in friendly competitions, or get inspired by seeing others' achievements.

Apps like StepBet or virtual walking events can provide structure and incentives, helping you stay motivated to reach new milestones. It's also important to vary your routes to keep things fresh and exciting. Exploring new paths or parks can add an element of adventure and discovery to your walks.

For those who enjoy a bit of gamification, apps like Zombies, Run! can turn your walk into an adventure. This app weaves a narrative where you collect supplies and evade zombies, making your walk feel like a thrilling mission rather than exercise. It's a fun way to get lost in a story while getting your steps in.

To get started with technology to modernize your walking, consider these tech-savvy tips:

- Use a fitness tracker: Monitor your steps and set daily or weekly goals to stay motivated.
- Explore walking apps: Try apps like MapMyWalk for tracking or Zombies, Run! for an adventurous twist.
- Join virtual challenges: Participate in online walking events or challenges to keep things exciting.
- Share your progress: Connect with friends on fitness platforms to share your achievements and offer each other encouragement.
- Here are some ways to elevate your walking routine with tech:
- Plan your route: Use GPS apps to explore new paths and

keep your walks interesting.

- Set goals: Use your fitness tracker to create achievable targets for each walk.
- Create a soundtrack: Match your walk with a themed playlist or audiobook for an immersive experience.
- Try geocaching: Turn your walk into a treasure hunt with this GPS-based activity.

Combining technology with scenic routes can turn your walking routine into a truly immersive experience. Start by choosing a beautiful, scenic route that not only provides a lovely backdrop but also keeps you engaged and entertained. Whether it's a local park, a nature trail, or a charming neighborhood street where you have not been yet, the change of scenery can boost your mood and make the walk feel less like exercise and more like a mini-adventure. As you walk, use a GPS app to record your route and discover new paths, ensuring that you never run out of options to explore. Google Maps also allows you to track each other's path as you walk.

Incorporate your fitness tracker or smartwatch to set specific goals for your walk, like reaching a certain distance or maintaining a steady heart rate. This can add a layer of challenge and motivation, encouraging you to push a bit further or try a slightly steeper path. Meanwhile, listening to a themed playlist or an audiobook that matches the vibe of your surroundings can enhance the sensory experience. Imagine walking through a forest while listening to a nature-themed

podcast or some calming music; it can make the whole experience feel cohesive and enriching.

If you're looking for a bit of tech-enabled fun, consider geocaching. This activity involves using GPS to find hidden virtual containers placed by other participants. It adds an element of treasure hunting to your walk, making it both interactive and rewarding. Additionally, it's a great way to discover new areas you might not have explored otherwise.

HOW MANY STEPS A DAY?

It is essential to determine how much you should walk each day to reap the benefits without getting tired. The researchers vary in their opinions, and there seems to be no accurate answer. It seems evident, however, that the commonly known limit of 10000 steps a day appears to be more of a marketing statement than a scientific finding.

More steps generally lead to greater health benefits. Still, even modest increases from a low baseline (such as 3,000 to 5,000 steps/day) can offer health benefits, especially for those with limited mobility or chronic conditions. Consistency is crucial – regular daily walking contributes to better health outcomes.

As a 62-year-old, you might aim to “park your car two blocks farther and add a 30-minute brisk walk,” while if you are an 85-year-old, you could focus on “three 10-minute strolls spread through the day.” Beyond about 8000 steps, the health curve flattens, so there’s no guilt if energy or joints limit longer

treks.

The following table shows evidence-based daily walking targets for older adults, which you can assume as your target.

Age	Steps/day	Walking time
60 – 69 yrs	6000 – 8000	60 – 90 min
70 – 79 yrs	5000 – 7000	50 – 80 min
80 yrs +	4000 – 5500	40 – 65 min

Accelerometry studies in adults aged 61-85 show that ~100 steps per minute is a reliable threshold for “moderate-intensity” walking, while a relaxed stroll for many seniors is closer to 85-90 steps per minute. To measure your stroll, count steps for 15 seconds; if you reach 25 steps, you’re in the moderate zone, which is 100 steps per minute.

Remember that all steps count – housework, errands, and garden trips add up – so dedicated “walking time” can be shorter than the table suggests if you stay generally active. Just being busy at home and around it, I walk around 3500 steps a day. The best way to determine the total number of steps you take is to wear a pedometer on your wrist. At the end of each day, you will know how many steps you’ve walked and whether you have to go out and top up the count, or you can finally relax in front of the TV watching your favourite programme.

In the Appendix > Walking, you will find useful websites with helpful information on this subject. If you would like to learn more about walking or need additional ideas, please visit some of these websites.