

Exercise Walking for Better Back Health

People with ongoing or recurrent episodes of lower back pain should consider the benefits of walking as a low-impact form of exercise. Aerobic exercise has long been shown to reduce the incidence of low back pain. However, people with low back pain often find some forms of exercise too painful to continue, and therefore don't get the exercise they need to maintain good health. Exercise walking is one way to benefit from regular exercise while not aggravating the structures in the lower back.

BENEFITS OF EXERCISE WALKING

There are many inherent health benefits from a regular routine of exercise walking, such as:

- **Strengthens muscles in the feet, legs, hips, and torso** - walking increases the stability of the spine and conditions the muscles that keep the body in the upright position.
- **Nourishes the spinal structures** - walking for exercise facilitates strong circulation, pumping nutrients into soft tissues and draining toxins.
- **Improves flexibility and posture** - exercise walking along with regular stretching allows greater range of motion; helps prevent awkward movements, and susceptibility of future injury.
- **Strengthens bones and reduces bone density loss** - regular walking for exercise helps prevent osteoporosis and can aid in reducing osteoarthritis pain.
- **Helps with controlling weight** - any regular exercise routine helps maintain a healthy weight, especially as one ages and metabolism slows.

EFFECTIVE EXERCISE WALKING TECHNIQUES

Using the following techniques will help improve the benefits of walking:

1. Walk briskly, but as a general rule maintain enough breath to be able to carry on a conversation.
2. Start out with a 5 minute walk and work up to walking for at least 30 minutes (about 2 miles) at least 3 to 4 times a week.
3. Maintain good form while walking to get the optimum aerobic benefit with each step and help protect the back and avoid injury. These elements of form should be followed:
 - **Head and shoulders:** Keep the head up and centered between the shoulders, with eyes focused straight ahead at the horizon. Keep the shoulders relaxed but straight - avoid slouching forward.
 - **Abdominal muscles:** It is important to actively use the abdominal muscles to help support the trunk of the body and the spine. To do this, keep the stomach pulled in slightly and stand fully upright. Avoid leaning forward as you walk.

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Treatments

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"Wake up Feeling Good."

- **Hips:** The majority of the forward motion should start with the hips. Each stride should feel natural - not too long or too short. Most people make the mistake of trying to take too long of stride.
- **Arms and hands:** Arms should stay close to the body, with elbows bent at a 90 degree angle. While walking, the arms should keep in motion, swinging front to back in pace with the stride of the opposite leg. Remember to keep hands relaxed, lightly cupped with the palms inward and thumbs on top. Avoid clenching the hands or making tight fists.
- **Feet:** With each step, land gently on the heel and midfoot, rolling smoothly to push off with the toes. Be mindful about using the balls of the feet and toes to push forward with each step.

DO I NEED WALKING SHOES?

Exercise walking, as with other forms of exercise, requires the right equipment for a safe and effective routine. Good walking shoes are an important investment; choosing the appropriate walking shoes is important to maximize the benefits of exercise walking.

Finding the proper walking shoe may take some time and a bit of money, but it is essential for achieving long and short term benefits. Shoes are the most important piece of equipment in walking.

Walking shoes provide a basic protection and mechanical support for the

foundation structures of the body - the feet - which in turn help keep the entire body balanced and aligned. When there is a minute imbalance in the feet, the compensatory domino effect causes changes throughout the body.

Specifically, when the body's natural gait motion is off balance, the body counterbalances the problem by redistributing weight. This ultimately changes the natural posture and alignment of the spine, leading to muscle strain and back pain over time. Though the imbalance may seem minor, in the long run, the stresses added to the body can add up and cause unnecessary wear and tear.

The right walking shoes can help foster excellent balance and posture during exercise walking, while poorly fitted walking shoes can cause pain or increase susceptibility to injury. It is best to find a technical running shoe store that will watch the individual's walk and will provide a shoe that fits based on the individual's specific biomechanics (this service is not typically found in large chain stores).

Walking shoes should allow the feet to naturally roll slightly inward (pronation) and outward (supination) to help absorb the different forces acting on the body. For many people, either one or both feet under pronate (roll outward) or over pronate (roll inward), altering the balance

and length of the leg during stance, as well as gait. Some shoes are designed to control over pronation, whereas others are designed to encourage pronation. Therefore it is important to make sure that walking shoes match each individual's specific biomechanical pattern.

An additional side effect of pronation and supination is the change in the natural curvature of the arches of the feet.

The feet are the crucial elements of gait motion, and maintaining a smooth gait is critical to preserving good spinal health. To ensure the correct balance during exercise walking, one must limit over pronation and under pronation of the feet. Good walking shoes should provide this stability.

USING A TREADMILL

When using a treadmill for walking exercise, all of the above guidelines are still important, with the additional caution to avoid using the handrails as much as possible (unless they are needed to keep balanced).

Click here for more information about walking and guidelines for buying walking shoes: <http://www.spine-health.com/wellness/exercise/walking-shoes-exercise-walking>

Talk to Dr. Chapman about specific questions related to your unique health situation.

**Contact Dr. Chapman
to learn more or schedule an appointment
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<http://www.spine-health.com/doctor/chiropractor/greg-chapman-missoula-mt>