

# Why All Runners Should Walk More

Simulate the aerobic benefits of running without adding more wear and tear to your body.

BY ASHLEY MATEO

**W**hy walk if you can run? That's the mindset held by most runners, who prefer powering through their miles over slowing their stride. But just like speed workouts and recovery runs offer different benefits, so do walking workouts.

Yes, workouts. Walking isn't just a way to get from point A to point B; it can be a smart training strategy to help you reach your running goals.

And pure walking—not the run-walk method—is getting more popular. Strava users uploaded one-and-a-half to two times the number of running, cycling, and indoor workouts in 2020, but uploads of outdoor walks increased by three times, the social media platform reported.

How exactly can integrating more walks benefit regular runners? The experts break it down.

## The Physiological Benefits of Walking

Let's get this out of the way right off the bat: Yes, running burns more calories than walking. But performance isn't just about firing up your metabolism.

From a simple biomechanics standpoint, running and walking are similar. You are moving in the same linear, forward motion, but while running is essentially a series of jumps punctuated by brief moments where

you're flying free, "with walking, you're always working," says Janet Hamilton, certified strength and conditioning coach and owner of Running Strong in Atlanta. "You're either pushing or pulling; your feet are always on the ground."

You may not really notice that difference because your heart and lungs aren't working as hard as they would during a run, but "that work can be quite challenging, especially for your hips, lower back, and core," says Hamilton—all crucial players in your running gait.

Of course, if you're walking at a brisk pace, your heart and lungs are still working hard, which makes walking a strategic way to help build your aerobic base, says Heather Milton, certified strength and conditioning coach and exercise physiologist and clinical specialist at the NYU Langone Health Sports Performance Center. "When you have an aerobic base, it makes higher intensity training more manageable and easier to recover from because it trains your body to more easily replenish energy stores," she says.

That's because sustained, low-intensity training increases your cells' production of mitochondria, which leads to adaptations that transport oxygen to the working muscles more efficiently—all of which will eventually help you run faster for longer using the same amount of energy.

## WALK THIS WAY

*It's one of the most natural things we do. But if you're walking to work out, keep these factors in mind to maximize the benefits.*

**Set a brisk pace.** It's not power walking, but rather, a conversational-but-"have somewhere to be" pace. Walking between 2.5 and 4 miles per hour (or 24 and 15 minutes per mile) counts as moderate-intensity activity, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

**Maintain your form.** Don't feel like you need to really pump it, taking big strides and swinging your arms. Stand tall, keep your eyes up, flex your elbows so your arm swing is natural and relaxed, and keep your feet under you, just like you do when you're running.

**Squeeze your glutes.** Running requires a powerful push-off generated mostly through glute activation and strength; practice this muscle activation while walking to reinforce good running biomechanics. It can be easier to focus when you're moving slower and with less impact.

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On a musculoskeletal level, running and walking are weight-bearing exercises that put stress on our bones, helping to make them stronger. But the repetitive impact of landing while running can do a number on your joints, muscles, and bones, says Milton. “Walking can be a good way to get some of the aerobic benefits of running without subjecting your body to that same impact,” she says.

Running produces ground reaction forces that are approximately 2.5 times your body weight, according to a study published in the *Clinical Journal of Sport Medicine*, while walking generates ground reaction forces that are around 1.2 times your body weight. That’s about half the impact your body has to absorb.

Plus, walking offsets the dangerous repercussions of too much sitting, something even athletes aren’t immune

to. Healthy individuals who walk less than 8,000 steps per day inhibit their body’s fat metabolism response, even if they perform an hour of moderate-intensity running, a February 2021 study published in *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* found. This “exercise resistance,” as researchers call it, could keep you from optimizing your hard work in the short-term—and eventually sabotage your long-term running goals.

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## How to Work Walking Into Your Training

Three ways to maximize your workouts.

**As a finisher:** Walking is a form of active recovery, which makes it ideal after a long run. “The recovery process decreases your sympathetic nervous system (aka fight or flight) response, and increases the parasympathetic nervous system (aka rest and digest) response,” says Milton. “That’s when our hormone concentrations increase, and our bone, ligaments, tendons, and muscles are repaired. We literally have cells that break down the injured tissue and build back new, healthier, and stronger tissue in its place. This includes replacing red blood cells, building collagen, muscle protein, and bone cells.”

After you wrap up a longer run, “try walking 30 to 60 seconds for every mile you logged,” says Hamilton. Say, 10 to 20 minutes after a 20-mile long run. That’ll kick-start the recovery process so you head into your next workout feeling stronger. Bonus: That’s a great time to get fluid and fuel promptly post-workout, which will also aid your recovery process.

**As a second workout:** Most people don’t need to do two workouts a day, says Hamilton, but if you’re striving to increase your total mileage and perhaps don’t have the time (or capacity) to do it all in one workout, “the second one should be a workout of lower intensity than the first—especially if you’re just introducing two-a-days,” she says.

The benefit of walking for that second workout is that you’re still elevating your heart rate, but you’re reducing the impact loading on your bones, Hamilton says. “That’s going to reduce the risk of overuse injuries and allow you a little bit more active recovery time.” That active recovery element is especially beneficial because, while you’re still logging time on your feet, you’re increasing blood flow to your working

muscles, which “brings in nutrients and other things that are necessary for tissue repair and regeneration,” says Hamilton.

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**In lieu of easy runs:** During easy runs, you’re mostly increasing the number of mitochondria and capillaries in your muscles, as well as the blood flow to those muscles, so they’re better able to utilize oxygen. Walking stimulates a lot of the same adaptations, says

Hamilton—again, without adding extra shock and impact to your bones, muscles, and tendons.

There’s no magic distance as to how far you should walk, although 15 minutes of walking was shown to be as beneficial as five minutes of running in a study published in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*. You can use that as your formula (converting a 20-minute easy run into a 60-minute walk), or just think about it in terms of how long you would have run, says Hamilton. Does an easy three- to four-mile run take you about 25 to 35 minutes to complete? You won’t cover the same distance walking that long, but you’ll get the benefits of the same amount of time on your feet. ♦

## FLIPPING THE SCRIPT

Four tips to help change your mentality on walking.

**Reject the pressure to do more.** “In athletic culture, rest is not encouraged,” says Megan Cannon, Ph.D., a sports psychologist based in Allentown, Pennsylvania. “The mentality has become more about who’s doing the most than who’s doing it the healthiest.” That has created this belief that walking is somehow lazy or less than—i.e., if you can’t run, what’s the point? Reject that kind of negativity.

**It requires a total shift in perspective.** “If we’re able to see the value of what a walk provides—whether that’s a break on your feet, the ability to then run longer in the future because you’re taking that break, or building up more weekly mileage without beating up your body—that’s what’s going to impact our mindset and behavior,” says Cannon.

**Embrace the pace.** For those who have a contentious relationship with walking, being able to move more slowly is all about baby steps. “If your goal is to eventually walk five extra miles a week, maybe you start by literally walking 100 feet, then 150 feet after a run,” says Cannon. It’s those small actions that will bridge that transition and ultimately build a new habit.

**Focus on feel, not performance.** As you start integrating walking, focus on your feel throughout your day versus comparing your performance to that of the people you follow on run tracking apps. “Do your legs feel stronger? Are you feeling more energized in other parts of your day?” says Cannon. “Reflecting that comparison back on yourself instead of other runners is also going to help you see the value of a walk, which will help drive home that habit.”