

How to Improve Your Walking Speed: Train Your Body and Your Brain

Transcript

[0:00 How to improve your walking speed]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: If you notice that your walking speed is slowing or if you find yourself outside of the typical range after taking the 10-metre test, there are things you can do to improve your walking speed. These include improving strength, flexibility and your overall fitness level as well as training your brain to walk more efficiently.

Let's learn a bit more about each of these.

[0:30 Simple exercises for strength and flexibility]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: The muscles in our legs and torso (also known as 'trunk' or 'core') help to stabilize us as we walk. By increasing the muscle strength in our legs and our torso, we're optimizing the 'machinery' that we need in order to walk. We also need our joints to be flexible so the muscles can move our limbs efficiently; for example, using the full length of our stride.

Changes you might notice as you age are: being unable to extend your leg behind you in order to step forwards; difficulty standing on your legs for longer periods or; difficulty lifting your foot as you swing your leg forwards.

There are some simple exercises that you can do at home to improve your strength and flexibility. Take a moment to review a series of 5 standing exercises that can be done at any age or stage. Don't worry about writing anything down; you'll be able to download a copy of all the exercises after watching this video.

Do these standing exercises daily, standing straight, holding onto a counter or rail for support, and looking straight ahead.

- Toe Ups: Gently rise up on your toes and hold for 3 seconds. Then rock back on your heels, hold for 3 seconds.
- Leg-Sideways Lift: Lift your leg sideways, hold for 3 seconds and bring it back.
- Leg Kickback: Bring your leg backward, keeping the knee straight, and hold for 3 seconds. Don't lean forward.
- Marching: Lift your knees one at a time and march in place.
- Knee Bends: Bend both knees slowly, hold for 3 seconds. Keep your feet flat on the floor.

Your goal should be to complete 20 repetitions of each standing exercise, 3 times per day.

You may wish to ask your health care provider about the Otago Exercise Program. It is an evidence-based individualized training program with exercises that promote strength, balance and walking. Now, let's talk about overall physical fitness.

[2:52 Improving your overall fitness]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: To increase our walking speed, we also need to improve our basic level of fitness to walk efficiently. This means that we don't experience breathlessness as we walk, and that there's an efficient delivery of oxygen to the muscles. If walking takes a lot of energy, you'll do it less often compared to people who don't feel tired when they walk.

The Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines recommend that adults aged 18 to 64 years should accumulate **at least 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous aerobic physical activity per week**, as well as several hours of light physical activities, including standing. They also recommend adding **muscle and bone-strengthening activities** using your major muscle groups at least twice a week. For those 65 years of age and older, physical activities that help with **balance** are also recommended. The key to any exercise program is to find something you enjoy so that you're more likely to stick with it.

The Guidelines also include recommendations to **reduce sedentary time** and pay attention to the quality of our **sleep**. For adults aged 18 to 64, sedentary time should be reduced to 8 hours or less per day, with no more than 3 hours of recreational screen time, and with additional advice to break up long periods of sitting as often as possible. It is also recommended that you get 7 to 9 hours of good-quality sleep regularly, with consistent bed and wake-up times.

You can download the Guidelines from our Resources area.

Keep in mind, as we age, we may need to be careful about starting new exercise routines. Visual problems, hearing problems, heart disease, lung disease, muscle weakness or balance issues, and other conditions may make exercise unsafe. When possible, consider group exercise classes specifically designed for you. It's always safest to consult with your health care providers before starting new exercise routines and to make sure you're on the right track.

[05:13 Training your brain to meet the demands of walking]

Dr. Anthony Levinson: We can also improve our walking by practicing. This helps to restore the brain pattern used to engage our muscles and nerves to better meet the demands of walking. Improvements in walking occur when our brains, muscles, joints and nerves respond more efficiently to meet the demands of walking. Here are some suggestions to improve your walking efficiency.

Practice walking and consciously monitor your progress. Try different modifications such as:

- increase your speed safely for short distances
- walk forwards and practice changing directions, walking sideways then forwards and backwards stepping
- perform dual-tasking or multi-tasking activities such as walking carrying objects or walking while counting or listening to music
- walk on circular paths, clockwise and counter-clockwise; or paths that follow a figure-eight shape.

All these suggestions make your walking more challenging so that you become more skillful at making adjustments to your walking pattern with less effort.

You can also practice stepping over objects as you walk. For example, place several objects at distances across the floor of a room, then practice walking and stepping over the objects. Be conscious of the changes that occur as you step over the object and then start walking again.

These activities disrupt your walking pattern and force you to adjust your balance. This is good practice for when you encounter unexpected disturbances while walking.

Skilled walkers tend to have an efficient approach to walking and are more likely to walk more and experience less difficulty with moving generally.

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