

Walking as exercise

A guide for people with heart conditions



ACPICR

Association of Chartered Physiotherapists
In Cardiovascular Rehabilitation

Walking is part of daily life. However it can also be great exercise.

We can gain important health benefits from walking by structuring it in the right way.

Walking for health can include walking groups, walking the dog and walking on a treadmill.

What are the specific benefits?

- It's a free activity
- It requires no specialist equipment except a comfortable pair of shoes and perhaps a raincoat!
- It may already be part of your daily routine
- It can improve your fitness
- It is a weight-bearing exercise which can help improve bone health.
- Walking outside has many health benefits, including increased vitamin D, improved quality of sleep and improved feelings of well being.



When could I start?

Everyone can start a walking programme following a heart condition. It is often one of the best ways to begin increasing your activity levels. A walking programme can be developed for all levels of fitness. Your cardiovascular rehabilitation team will be able to guide you with this.

How can I get started?

It's best to start with a small walk most days even if it's just 2 or 3 minutes the first time. This will allow you to see what your breathing feels like and assess where you are starting from.

If you have had a recent heart event, such as a heart attack or surgery, you might find you can't walk as far as you are used to while your body is recovering.

Some people find it helpful when they are starting out to choose a walking route that is flat and safe.

Once you can comfortably walk for a few minutes then start to increase the duration you are walking for; increasing by a few minutes at a time.

The next step

To progress your walking start to introduce some longer walks. Dedicate 2 or 3 days a week to attempt a longer walk.

Think about doing these walks on days you are not doing other exercise, such as your cardiac rehab exercise.

What about warm up and cool down?

Structure your longer walks to include a 'warm up' at the beginning, a main 'workout' section in the middle where you walk at a more brisk pace, and a 'cool down' section, walking slower for the final part of the walk.



Stop exercising if you experience any chest pain, palpitations, dizziness or light-headedness. If the symptoms do not go away promptly with rest and/or GTN spray/tablets seek medical advice as soon as possible.

Warm up- Aim for a minimum of 15 minutes. Should feel 'light' intensity. Start slow. This could be walking slower indoors or outside. You may be able to do the warm up exercises advised by your cardiac rehab team.

Main (aerobic) workout- Aim to build up to at least 20 minutes. Feeling 'somewhat hard'. You could incorporate some hills, or increase the pace you are walking at. Perhaps add in some sections of faster walking. Or you could continue to further increase the duration of some of your walks.

Cool down- Minimum of 10 minutes. Slow down at the end of your walk.



How should I feel during my session?

Listen to your body and think about how it compares with how you feel in your cardiac rehabilitation exercise sessions.

Working comfortably at a moderate level is recommended.

You should feel your breathing rate and heart rate have increased but you should still be able to talk in a sentence and able to continue. It is fine to feel that you are exerting yourself so long as you are not struggling.

Try not to stop during these longer walks for health. If you are feeling very out of breath, you could try slowing your walking pace for a section to allow you to recover, and then pick the pace back up again as you feel able.

If you feel exhausted doing an activity or feel more tired than usual the day after, you may have worked too hard or for too long.

Stop exercising if you experience any chest discomfort, palpitations, dizziness or light-headedness. If the symptoms do not go away promptly with rest and/ or your GTN spray/tablets, seek medical advice as soon as possible.

Other things to consider

- Don't exercise immediately after eating a large meal.
- Remember to take a bottle of water with you and a mobile phone if walking alone.
- Do not exercise if you feel unwell.
- Make sure you have taken your medications, as prescribed, prior to exercise.
- Plan your route and don't walk too far to begin with. You need to be able to walk back again!
- When planning your route, take into consideration any hills, what the weather is like and your footwear.



This guidance is based on available evidence and expert opinion.

Produced by the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Cardiovascular Rehabilitation

This leaflet is not intended to replace the advice that your doctor or cardiovascular rehabilitation team give you based on their expert knowledge of your condition.

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