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Good Housekeeping's

WALK YOURSELF SLIMMER AND FITTER IN 4 WEEKS

Want to get fit, lose weight or join the thousands of women training for this year's MoonWalk? Our walking plan gives you the basics you need to get going. But be careful... Walk the Walk founder, Nina Barough, helped us compile the plan and says that walking is addictive: 'Many of the women who do The MoonWalk every Summer had never even owned a pair of trainers before they started – let alone walked a marathon – but they get inspired by the challenge and come back again and again.'

WEEK ONE

Take it easy this week and focus on achieving your 30 minutes rather than on your speed.

AIM TO: Walk for 30 minutes over and above your normal daily activity on most (at least 5 out of 7) days of the week.

DAY 1: March on the spot for a few minutes, lifting your knees high, then do six shoulder rolls and side bends to help you loosen up. Before you start timing your walk, have a five-minute warm up, gradually increasing to your full walking pace. Then slow again for a few minutes at the end to cool down.

DAY 2: Check your posture – walk tall with your chin parallel to the ground, eyes focused ahead, shoulders relaxed and pelvis slightly tucked under, which engages your core muscles, but making sure you keep your body loose and relaxed. This lessens the strain on muscles and joints. Then check your walking technique – hit the ground heel first and roll all the way through your foot, pushing off firmly with your toes. Keep your hands in a soft fist, with your thumb and fingers just touching.

DAY 3: Do the talk test to check your pace. If you're too puffed to talk, you're walking too fast and need to slow down. If you can hold a tune, you need to increase your pace.

DAY 4: Take a rest day. Don't panic if you ache. Walking is low-impact exercise, which doesn't put undue strain on joints, so aches are likely to be underused muscles reacting to unexpected activity.

DAY 5: Add momentum and increase your cardiovascular workout by propelling your arms back and forth as you walk. Bend your arms at 90° angles and pump your elbows – allow your hands to go only to shoulder height on the upswing and just past your waist on the downswing.

DAY 6: If you're pushed for time, take two or three shorter walks instead of one. Researchers at Loughborough University found that women walking continuously for 30 minutes, five days a week, had almost identical fitness to those who

split it into three 10-minute stints.

DAY 7: Have a rest day if you really need it, but remember that weekends are an ideal time to get friends and family involved and explore walks a bit further afield. If the week has left you feeling worn out, just slow your pace and enjoy the scenery.

WEEK TWO

Even by week two you will find that you're walking further in 30 minutes than you did at the beginning.

AIM TO: Increase your walking time by 10 minutes on at least three days of the week.

DAY 8: If walking alone suits you, stick with it. But if your enthusiasm is flagging, look for a walking buddy with roughly the same schedule and level of fitness.

DAY 9: Add intervals where you increase your pace for a few minutes. From your normal walking speed, step up your pace a notch for two minutes, then drop back to normal walking for two minutes. Keep alternating for as long as you can.

DAY 10: Variety will help keep you motivated. Don't just stick with one route – have several that you can alternate.

DAY 11: Take a rest from walking and try another activity, like swimming, dancing or yoga.

DAY 12: Keep a spring in your step by listening to upbeat music while you walk. Researchers at Ohio State University found that it helps you walk further and boosts your brain power into the bargain.

DAY 13: Repeat what you did on day nine, but try adding more intervals to your walk today.

DAY 14: Take a rest if you need it or go for a walk with the rest of the family.



WEEK THREE

By now, you'll be walking faster and with more confidence – and pushing your body harder.

AIM TO: Increase your walking time to 45 minutes on at least three days of the week, and try to do most of your walk at a brisker pace by the end of the week.

DAY 15: Check your technique, especially when you start walking faster. Make sure you're not leaning forward, which will affect your posture and put stress on your joints. Don't over-stride – more small steps, rather than longer ones, will help you move forward faster.

DAY 16: Add some intervals to today's walk. Walk for five minutes, then speed up to your fastest pace for three before dropping back. Repeat twice during the walk.

DAY 17: Feel those endorphins flooding through your body. Studies have shown that walking is as effective as anti-depressants in combating mild depression.

DAY 18: Have a rest day and do another activity, like swimming, dancing or yoga.

DAY 19: If you're aiming to lose weight, just 15 minutes' walking has been shown to reduce chocolate cravings. Scientists at Exeter University think that walking affects brain chemicals that help regulate mood and food cravings.

DAY 20: Do an interval walk again today. Walk for five minutes at normal pace, then speed up for three before going back down. Repeat three times during the walk.

DAY 21: Walk with the family – find a fun, short walk round a local country park or stately home.

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WEEK FOUR

You should now be feeling fitter than you could have imagined three weeks ago, so keep the momentum going.

AIM TO: Walk for 45 minutes on at least four days of the week, and get your body working harder by adding inclines to your walks.

DAY 22: If you've focused on road walking, add more green spaces to your routes. Research shows that walking in natural surroundings reduces blood pressure and cuts stress and tension more than walking in an urban setting.

DAY 23: Head for the hills – or at least include some gentle ones in your walk. Walking on an incline forces your muscles and cardiovascular system to work harder and burns one third more calories than walking on the flat. And it works on the way down as well as up – downhill walking also helps tone your bottom and thighs.

DAY 24: Add intervals to your walk again today. Speed up for three minutes, three times during your walk.

DAY 25: Have a rest day and do another activity, like swimming, dancing or yoga.

DAY 26: Admire your newly toned body. US researchers found that women who walked the furthest each week had the narrowest hip and waist measurements.

DAY 27: Do interval walking today. Speed up for three minutes, then drop to your normal pace for five minutes, three times during your walk.

DAY 28: Organise a big walk for family and friends.