

Why You Should Upgrade to Nordic Walking

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › While typical walking or running activates about 40% of your muscles, Nordic walking uses 90% of your muscles, providing a lower and upper body workout in one
- › It also requires about 18% to 25% more oxygen consumption compared to walking without poles at the same speed
- › Nordic walking leads to greater increases in functional capacity – or the ability to carry out activities related to daily living – compared to high-intensity interval training (HIIT) and moderate-to-vigorous intensity continuous training (MICT) in people with coronary heart disease
- › Nordic walking led to positive effects on body composition, cardiovascular parameters, glucose tolerance and body measurements in people with overweight or obesity
- › In middle-aged adults, Nordic walking led to less stress and anxiety, a decrease in body fat and an increase in lower body strength

Engaging in a variety of physical activities that keep your body moving is a key element of healthy aging. One unique activity – Nordic walking – is gaining momentum because of its low impact nature and impressive fitness gains. If you're used to typical walking, upgrading to Nordic walking is a powerful way to take your workout up a notch.

Nordic walking, sometimes referred to as Nordic pole walking, involves walking with fixed-length ski poles. The movement is similar to cross country skiing, without the

snow, and originated in Finland, where it's commonly used by cross country skiers for training during the off-season.¹

While typical walking or running activates about 40% of your muscles, Nordic walking uses 90% of your muscles, providing a lower and upper body workout in one. It also requires about 18% to 25% more oxygen consumption compared to walking without poles at the same speed.² The American Nordic Walking Association explained:³

“The lower body gets the benefits of traditional walking or speed walking, and the poles work the upper body. Because of this combination, Nordic pole walkers benefit from fitness-building stimulation that’s not present in normal walking, as the chest, triceps, biceps, shoulders, and abdominals get a workout along with the leg muscles. The core is also engaged as the walker thrusts forward with the poles.”

Nordic Walking Boosts Cardiovascular Health

Nordic walking may be an ideal form of exercise for people with coronary heart disease, as it leads to greater increases in functional capacity – or the ability to carry out activities related to daily living – compared to other forms of exercise, including high-intensity interval training (HIIT) and moderate-to-vigorous intensity continuous training (MICT).⁴

Researchers with the University of Ottawa tested 12 weeks of the different forms of exercise – Nordic walking, HIIT or MICT – among 130 patients with coronary artery disease.⁵ While all of the exercise groups noted improvements in functional capacity, quality of life and symptoms of depression, Nordic walking led to additional benefits in increasing functional capacity as well as greater increases in the six-minute walk test, which is used to assess exercise capacity.

While HIIT led to a 13% improvement in functional capacity, compared to 12% in the MICT group, Nordic walking led to an impressive 19% improvement.⁶ Lead study author Jennifer Reed explained:

“This is a key finding because lower functional capacity predicts higher risk of future cardiovascular events in people with coronary artery disease. Nordic walking engages core, upper and lower body muscles while reducing loading stress at the knee, which may have resulted in greater improvements in functional capacity.”

For older adults and those who may be deconditioned or unable to perform high-intensity exercise, Nordic walking presents an ideal physical activity to improve cardio-respiratory fitness and balance with low risk.⁷

In a study of women aged 50 to 69 years old, for instance, 12 weeks of Nordic walking led to slightly greater benefits in cardiorespiratory capacity and quality of life compared to regular recreational walking.⁸ It also improved Vo2 max, a measure of oxygen consumption during exercise that is commonly used as a marker of fitness level.

Nordic Walking Leads to Weight Loss

Walking is the most common activity used to increase physical activity in sedentary people, but eventually it's difficult to reach higher levels of fitness by walking alone, particularly if walking speed isn't increased. Among people with obesity, however, it can be difficult to increase walking speed enough to reap the full benefits of a higher intensity workout.

Nordic walking again presents an ideal bridge between ordinary walking and HIIT, as it increases exercise intensity and energy expenditure, yet is low impact. The use of poles makes Nordic walking appealing for those with mobility impairments, including Parkinson's disease.

In a small study of three individuals with Parkinson's, therapeutic benefits to motor and gait function were noted after six weeks of Nordic walking, consisting of 15 one-hour sessions – and the gains were retained for the three-month follow-up period, during which Nordic walking was done three times a week.⁹

The use of poles while Nordic walking also reduces the load on lower limbs, helping to prevent damage and pain to the knee joint, which is important for people with obesity.¹⁰ In a systematic review, Nordic walking programs were found to be an effective modality for weight loss in overweight and obese patients, with additional benefits to risk factors for cardiovascular diseases.¹¹

Among this population, Nordic walking led to positive effects on body composition, cardiovascular parameters, glucose tolerance and body measurements, with the greatest improvements seen among those who engaged in Nordic walking frequently and under supervision. “For weight loss,” the researchers noted, “NW [Nordic walking] should be prescribed four to five times per week, at least 60 minutes per session, preferably combined with diet control.”¹²

In another study involving 14 women with low levels of physical activity, visceral obesity and metabolic disorders, eight weeks of Nordic walking – performed three times a week for 60 minutes, at maximal fat oxidation intensity – led to a significant decrease in waist and hip circumference, waist-to-height ratio and body adiposity index.¹³

Asprosin, which regulates appetite and the release of glucose from the liver – a compound that’s typically elevated in people with obesity – also significantly decreased.

Middle-Aged? Nordic Walking Is Good for You

While Nordic walking is frequently recommended for the elderly, it’s also a phenomenal exercise for healthy middle-aged people, offering benefits to resting heart rate, blood pressure, exercise capacity, maximal oxygen consumption and quality of life.¹⁴

In a study that looked specifically at the effects of Nordic walking on middle-aged adults, engaging in two weekly sessions of about 60 minutes each had physical and mental health benefits, including lower levels of reported stress and anxiety. A decrease in body fat was also noted, particularly among women, while lower body strength significantly increased.¹⁵

Phase angle also significantly increased in men and women following Nordic walking. This parameter is associated with increased strength and alterations in cellular membrane integrity or body fluid.

“So,” researchers explained, “NW could be considered a “protective” activity for the aging process.”¹⁶ An added benefit to Nordic walking is that it’s traditionally done outdoors, adding in the benefits of nature and green space to your workout while providing opportunities for socialization. Writing in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, researchers noted:¹⁷

“NW could answer two human needs: the importance of the use of green urban space and the possibility to easily perform physical activity. It is an easy kind of physical activity that could be done by anyone and everywhere in the green urban space. Even if it is usually used for a specific kind of population or for rehabilitation in chronic disease, NW also has a lot of potential benefits for the general population.

From the results of our study, we can see that NW increases resistance and lower body strength and also influences the changes in body composition. The popularity of this sport is increasing ... It would be important to encourage its practice not only to older people but also to younger people because it is an easy sport that anyone could practice anywhere they want.”

How to Get Started With Nordic Walking

To get started with Nordic walking, you’ll need to choose poles, which come in different models depending on your needs. Poles come in telescoping varieties, which are “one-size-fits-all” and easy to transport, as well as in one piece, which tend to be stronger and lighter but must be fitted to the correct size.

Different tips are also available, including rubber tips, which work best on pavement, and metal tips, which provide traction if you’ll be walking on grass, dirt or uneven terrain.¹⁸

A newer form of Nordic walking uses poles that have an integrated resistance shock absorber, which is designed to increase the load on the upper body via resistance. Using these types of poles requires additional work from your upper limbs and therefore increases the overall intensity of the exercise.¹⁹ This may lead to even greater fitness gains, particularly for metabolic health,²⁰ but the increased intensity must be taken into account.

There is some technique involved in learning to Nordic walk, using a movement similar to cross country skiing. Your arm movement will determine your stride, with longer pole thrusts leading to a longer stride.

You should avoid holding the poles too tightly, and move them in opposition to your legs – moving your left arm and right foot at the same time, for example. Your elbow should be at a 90-degree angle with the poles at your side. You can check your form this way, according to the American Nordic Walking Association:²¹

“Strap on the poles if you haven’t already and let them drag behind you at about a 45-degree angle as you walk. Once the angle feels correct, grip the poles again and plant them on the ground instead of dragging them. You’ll still plant at that same 45-degree angle backward, with your elbows close to your body and your arms straight and relaxed.

As you get comfortable with planting, add pushing. Push the poles through each step, applying more pressure to your plant (the feeling is like “launching” or “boosting” yourself with each step). You’ll feel force on the strap. As you perfect your stride, focus on rolling from your heels to your toes on each step and pushing off with a fuller swing of the arms for a better benefit from your workout.”

If you’re just getting started, you may find that adjustable poles are easier to use in the beginning, however once you have your poles, most people can get started right away. As you progress, you can experiment with different techniques, including double poling, which involves planting both poles in front of you, walking three steps, then repeating.²²

You can also vary your working by Nordic walking up and downhill and using striding, skating and jogging motions.²³

Various classes are available should you desire more formal training into the varying Nordic walking techniques and, remember, that for optimal fitness results, your workouts should include a variety of both nonexercise and exercise movement, including aerobic, resistance training and stretching activities.

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