

The Benefits of Interval Walking Training

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Interval walking training (IWT), developed by Japanese professor Nose Hiroshi to combat sedentary lifestyles in the Japanese populace, alternates between three-minute periods of slow and fast walking
- › Research shows health improvements, including 10% increased aerobic fitness, reduced blood pressure, and better glucose management within five months of practice
- › Studies demonstrate that even partial adherence to 60 minutes of weekly IWT increases HDL cholesterol, reduces liver fat, and improves cardiovascular health markers
- › Proper IWT technique involves stretching, alternating stride lengths, swinging arms at right angles, and maintaining conversational pace during slow periods, slightly tight calves during the fast ones
- › Additional walking benefits include aiming for 10,000 daily steps, using weighted vests for higher intensity, trying Nordic walking poles, and incorporating social elements or creative activities

Being sedentary is one of the worst things you can do for your health. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 25.3% of American adults don't engage in physical activities after clocking out from work.¹

Now, one way to combat this problem is simply going for a walk. However, it needs to be more than that — a structured regimen designed to marginally challenge your body is needed to boost your fitness, and one effective solution is interval walking training

(IWT).

IWT is a Japanese exercise developed by university professor Nose Hiroshi. Unlike conventional continuous walking, IWT alternates between periods of fast-paced walking and slower recovery periods.

IWT Found to Enhance Various Health Markers

In a meta-analysis published in *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism*, researchers reviewed the health benefits of IWT. By examining multiple studies since IWT's inception (2009), the team quantified how impactful IWT is, and whether the benefits were consistent across different groups of people. Participants in the selected studies consisted of middle-aged and older adults, including many who were managing chronic conditions.²

- **Improved aerobic fitness** — One striking finding was that aerobic fitness, measured as VO2 max, increased by about 10% after five months of IWT. For context, VO2 max refers to your body's ability to absorb and utilize oxygen.

To put it simply, your body becomes more efficient at supplying oxygen to your muscles, helping you stay energized and less likely to be fatigued during strenuous activities. Even a 10% increase is substantial, considering that as you age, maintaining or improving aerobic fitness becomes challenging yet crucial for longevity and better quality of life.

- **Blood pressure readings showed better numbers** — The studies showed reductions in both systolic and diastolic blood pressure. Specifically, participants saw drops of about 9 mm Hg in systolic (upper number) blood pressure and 5 mm Hg in diastolic (lower number) blood pressure, on average, over a five-month period.

Such changes represent a meaningful decrease in the risk for heart attacks, strokes, and other cardiovascular issues. In practical terms, IWT provides benefits comparable to some **blood pressure** medications, but without the side effects

commonly associated with taking them.

- **Timing and adherence significantly influenced the outcomes** – Researchers found that IWT provided robust health benefits when participants followed the program consistently. However, outside of controlled research settings, maintaining consistency proved challenging for many people. Average weekly walking time dropped dramatically, indicating that participants often struggled to stick to the recommended routine without additional support.
- **Specific groups reaped the largest health gains** – Older adults and those already facing metabolic challenges, like insulin resistance or prediabetes, demonstrated particularly noticeable improvements in glucose management.

Going deeper into the analysis, IWT was highly effective at enhancing glucose effectiveness, which is the muscles' ability to absorb sugar directly from the bloodstream without additional insulin. This result is a game-changer if you're at risk for diabetes, as it offers an immediate method to control blood sugar levels with minimal lifestyle changes.

- **The cycling of intensities is the source of the benefits** – Mechanistically, researchers attribute IWT's benefits to its unique approach of cycling between periods of higher and lower intensity. These alternating intensities stimulate muscles in a manner similar to resistance training but without the associated joint stress and muscle fatigue that heavier exercise routines often cause.
- **IWT is convenient** – The review emphasizes that IWT is especially advantageous because it does not require any special equipment or costly gym memberships, making it accessible and practical for nearly everyone. However, it also points out that overcoming barriers like motivation and adherence remains a challenge.

Study Confirms Benefits of IWT for Diabetics

A study published in PLoS One explored how IWT can work to help manage diabetes. Instead of a controlled laboratory setting, researchers aimed to evaluate how effectively participants could follow an IWT at home using a specially designed device to track their VO2 max.³

Fifty-one adult participants were asked to complete 60 minutes of IWT each week for a total of 20 weeks. The monitoring device helped them maintain the proper intervals of faster-paced walking, ensuring the sessions provided consistent intensity. Despite challenges commonly seen in home-based exercise routines, all participants completed the study, showing the routine was manageable enough for everyday use. However, only about 39% of participants fully reached the intended weekly walking goal.

- **Short-term IWT still produces noticeable improvements** – Even when the participants didn't fully meet the recommended time, health improvements still transpired. One notable outcome was the substantial rise in participants' HDL cholesterol, often labeled as "good" cholesterol because **it helps remove excess cholesterol from your bloodstream**. This eventually leads to meaningful health benefits, especially for diabetics who typically struggle with maintaining healthy cholesterol levels.
- **Liver fat was lowered** – Even small increases in weekly IWT minutes led to visible reductions in triglycerides, which is another biomarker linked to heart disease, and decreased liver fat as measured by MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scans. Lowering liver fat is especially beneficial because **fatty liver disease** is a common complication in Type 2 diabetes.
- **Consistency creates noticeable health improvements** – Participants who consistently met the target of at least 60 minutes per week experienced notably greater gains in aerobic fitness, which is measured by improvements in VO2 max.

Specifically, those meeting the exercise goal achieved an impressive 10% improvement in their aerobic capacity. This aligns closely with the earlier study I cited, reinforcing IWT as an effective form of cardiovascular exercise, even when

performed in a more unpredictable environment, such as your home.

- **IWT stimulates muscles without causing excess fatigue** – The brief periods of fast walking boost muscle function enough to improve fitness without overwhelming your body. Researchers emphasized how IWT mimics certain resistance-training benefits by repeatedly contracting and relaxing muscle fibers.

These actions improve muscle metabolism and overall muscle health, **significantly enhancing your body's ability to handle sugar efficiently**, which is crucial if you're currently managing Type 2 diabetes.

How to Do IWT Properly

Now that you know the health benefits of IWT, how do you do it? In the video above, Medical Frontiers host Erica Angyal tracks down Hiroshi to explain how IWT is done:⁴

1. Start by properly stretching your muscles.
2. Walk with a small stride. You'll know you're at the right intensity when you're able to enjoy a conversation with a walking partner.
3. Up the intensity by walking with bigger strides. Your heels are supposed to touch the ground first, then your toe.
4. Bend your arms at a right angle and swing them back and forth widely to help you walk with big strides naturally. Aim for a speed that slightly tightens your calf muscles.
5. Alternate between three minutes of slow walking and three minutes of fast walking.
6. Aim for a total of 60 minutes of fast walking weekly, spreading your IWT sessions in several days.

- **IWT can be done by everyone** – It began in Shinshu University in Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture. Hiroshi initially created IWT for athletes, but he retooled it to fit all age groups and fitness levels. From there, he noticed that it was an effective form of exercise that helped combat inactivity among aging adults.
- **Real-world results of IWT** – To test the effectiveness of IWT, Hiroshi's team created three groups – one that didn't walk, one that walked 10,000 steps every day, and one that did 30 minutes of IWT every day.

Once the study was completed, the team noticed that systolic blood pressure in the IWT group lowered four times more than the group who walked 10,000 steps. Furthermore, diastolic blood pressure decreased by 2.5 times. Based on these findings, the team believes that participants who practice IWT for five years will be able to reduce their risk of stroke by 40%.

- **IWT improves your fitness** – The findings showed that participants had better hamstring strength. Specifically, the IWT group had stronger hamstrings (by 12%) compared to the group that did 10,000 steps. Aerobic endurance was better as well.
- **Other benefits of IWT** – The team noticed that fitness wasn't the only improvement among the participants. Symptoms of depression were reduced by 50%, and sleep efficiency increased by 12%, too. Participants noted that their immune system was better thanks to IWT. "I used to get sick often, but now, I rarely catch colds. It's a major change," one participant says.⁵

Additional Tips to Make the Most Out of Your Walking Sessions

Barring any serious condition or disability, most people will benefit from going for a walk every day. But before you put your walking shoes on, here are some things that can help you maximize your IWT sessions further:

- 1. Aim for 10,000 steps** – There is no doubt in my mind that exercise is good for you, but too much of it eventually harms your health. [In my interview with cardiologist Dr. James O’Keefe](#), he noted that excessive vigorous (high-intensity) exercise eventually backfires on your health.

Here’s where walking comes in because it’s a medium-intensity exercise. O’Keefe’s research shows that you get significant health benefits when you aim for 10,000 steps daily (with a maximum of 12,000 steps). Once you get to the maximum rate, the benefits plunge down as if you were sedentary in the first place.

- 2. Wear a weighted vest** – If you’ve been exercising for quite a while now, try mixing up your routine via a weighted vest. The extra load engages your muscles more, helping build strength and endurance while keeping your routine in familiar territory.

When trying this method, pay attention to your posture to avoid injuries. Uneven weight distribution will cause your body to compensate by changing posture, leading to injuries such as lower back pain. So, start with something light and then increase your weight as you get better.

- 3. Try Nordic walking** – This exercise requires the use of fixed-length ski poles while walking on land, which essentially mimics the movement of skiing. The great thing about it is that it uses 90% of your muscles, which provides both your upper and lower body with a complete workout. Your aerobic fitness will also benefit, as it requires 18% to 25% more oxygen compared to walking without poles at the same speed.⁶

- 4. Go for a walk with a friend** – If you find that going for walks becomes monotonous, add a social element to keep things fresh. O’Keefe says:

“Exercising and making social connections at the same time, that is an absolute goldmine of a longevity activity. That means that even walking with your dog or your friend ... is huge ... The whole thing is to move your body in a fun, playful manner and make it social.”

5. Get creative while walking – I recommend you take advantage of your outdoor walks to improve your craft or engage in other hobbies that enrich your life, such as listening to audiobooks or podcasts. You can also use the time to brainstorm ideas for personal projects.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About IWT

Q: What exactly is interval walking training (IWT)?

A: Interval walking training involves alternating three minutes of brisk walking with three minutes of slower walking, creating a structured and effective workout that boosts aerobic fitness, reduces blood pressure, and helps manage blood sugar.

Q: Why is interval walking better than regular continuous walking?

A: Interval walking delivers greater health benefits, including significant reductions in blood pressure and improved muscle glucose absorption, compared to regular continuous walking. Alternating intensities stimulate muscles more effectively without excessive fatigue or joint strain.

Q: Who benefits the most from interval walking training?

A: Older adults, diabetics, and those with metabolic challenges experience the greatest improvements from interval walking. These groups see notable enhancements in heart health, cholesterol levels, and reductions in liver fat.

Q: Do I need special equipment or a gym membership to do interval walking?

A: No special equipment or gym memberships are required. Interval walking can easily fit into your daily routine, and simple wearable devices are sufficient to help you maintain the right pace and track your progress (while also minimizing your exposure to electromagnetic fields).

Q: How much IWT is recommended weekly to see health improvements?

A: For optimal results, aim for at least 60 minutes of brisk interval walking per week, spread across several sessions. Even moderate adherence leads to meaningful health improvements, but consistency greatly amplifies the benefits.

Sources and References

- ¹ [CDC, "Adult Physical Activity Outside of Work"](#)
- ² [Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism Volume 49, Number 7, July 2024](#)
- ³ [PLoS One. 2023 May 18;18\(5\):e0285762](#)
- ^{4, 5} [YouTube, NHK World-Japan, New Findings on Walking and Running - Medical Frontiers](#)
- ⁶ [Front Physiol. 2021 Sep 3;12:726783](#)