

Japanese Walking' Is a Fitness Trend Worth Trying

The workout is simple, and its health benefits are backed by nearly 20 years of research.

By Danielle Friedman

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Going for a walk is one of the simplest workouts, but it can have powerful health impacts. Walking has been linked to improved mental and cardiovascular health, and it can be effective for managing back pain.

But not all walking is equally effective.

A method nicknamed “Japanese walking” on social media — also known as interval walking training, or I.W.T. — seems to offer greater advantages than a simple stroll, or even than walking at a moderate pace for 8,000 or more steps a day.

The strategy was first introduced two decades ago in a study led by Hiroshi Nose, an exercise physiologist at Shinshu University Graduate School of Medicine in Japan. The country has one of the world’s oldest populations, and Dr. Nose hoped that, by applying interval-training techniques used by elite athletes to its senior community, he could improve older people’s health and reduce the country’s medical costs, he told The New York Times in an email. After seeing promising early results, he and his collaborator, Shizue Masuki, continued to study the method in depth.

While this type of exercise isn't new, it has been a trend on TikTok this summer. Here's what the science says about the benefits of interval walking and how to get started.

What is 'Japanese walking'?

As the name suggests, interval walking is a form of interval training, which involves alternating between bursts of intense activity and more gentle movement or rest. In this case, it's basically just alternating between fast and slow walking.

But compared with more classic forms of high-intensity interval training, interval walking is more approachable for many people, especially those who haven't exercised in a while or who are recovering from injuries that make high-impact activities like running difficult, said Dr. Carlin Senter, the chief of primary-care sports medicine at the University of California, San Francisco.

How do you do it?

All you need are comfortable shoes, a safe place to walk and a timer.

In the studies by Drs. Nose and Masuki, subjects typically walked quickly for three minutes and then slowly for three minutes. During fast periods, the idea is to feel as if you're working somewhat hard, to the point that you would have a hard time carrying on a conversation. The movement during the slow periods should be a gentle stroll. (The researchers capped the fast intervals at three minutes, they said, because that was the point at which many older volunteers started to feel tired.)

They recommend taking longer strides during the fast intervals than during the slow ones, to make the activity more challenging. They also suggest engaging your arms, bending them at the elbows and swinging them vigorously with each step, which will help you maintain proper form during longer strides.

In their studies, volunteers completed at least 30 minutes of interval walking four times a week. If you try it, those 30 minutes don't have to be continuous. The research suggests that breaking the sessions into roughly 10-minute segments three times a day can be just as effective.

While conducting their research, they found that, by taking regular recovery breaks, many interval walkers spent more time exercising at a high intensity than they would have if they had walked continuously at that intensity, since they tired out sooner when they didn't have breaks.

What are the health benefits?

In their original study of older adults, which was small, Drs. Nose and Masuki found that interval walkers saw significantly greater improvements in blood pressure, cardiovascular health and leg strength compared with volunteers who walked at a continuous, moderate pace.

In the decade since, a growing body of evidence from Drs. Nose and Masuki and other researchers has reinforced these findings and has suggested the method may have even more benefits. A 2018 study found that, over a 10-year period, interval walking was linked to fewer age-related declines in aerobic capacity and muscle power.

What's the best way to add interval walking to your exercise routine?

If you haven't been active in a while, "start low, go slow," Dr. Senter said. If three minutes feels too long for the faster intervals, start with a minute and work your way up.

Over time, as your fitness improves, you will probably be able to push yourself harder during the fast bouts.

Finally, if interval walking is your main form of exercise, aim to complement it with at least two days a week of strength training, along with balance and mobility training, Dr. Senter said.

Danielle Friedman is a journalist in New York and the author of “Let’s Get Physical: How Women Discovered Exercise and Reshaped the World.”