Walking or Running, Which is Better for You?

Walking or running doesn’t require a lot of preparation, athletic ability, exercise equipment, or a personal trainer. But the message from health care professionals is loud and clear – we all need to move our bodies more.

Both walking and running can deliver similar benefits:

- weight loss
- diabetes management and prevention
- reducing heart disease risk
- lowering blood pressure
- cancer prevention (especially breast and colon cancers)
- reducing the risk of cancer recurrence during survivorship

Cardiovascular exercise can also help reduce stress, serve as a free social activity with family and friends, and encourage you to go outside and into nature more often.

Walking or running consistently can help you live longer with improved quality of life. But, which one is better for you?

Well, it depends.

“The exercise guidelines for adults free of significant chronic disease recommends 150 minutes per week of moderate exercise, including strength training,” said Dr. Thomas Best, a sports medicine specialist with the University of Miami Sports Medicine Institute. “If you’re doing only strength training and are ignoring cardiovascular exercise, you’re not getting the full health benefits. And if you’re living a sedentary life and you’re not exercising at all — you need to move more.”
Obese people can benefit the most from walking, compared to running. “Obese patients typically have health or cardiovascular risk factors. If you have heart disease or diabetes, or are at risk, you should start with a visit to your doctor for possible testing,” says Dr. Best. A stress test can reveal your cardiovascular fitness level and help you and your doctor determine if you’re better suited to start walking or running to lose weight.

Adults in high-stress jobs are also at greater risk for cardiovascular issues that may lead to a heart attack. If this describes you, it’s best to see your doctor to rule out heart disease or high blood pressure. Even if you’re at a healthy weight, beginning a running routine could be demanding on your heart.

“Most people who don’t have significant chronic diseases are safe to start running,” Dr. Best said. “If you run for 30 minutes at a reasonable pace (four to five miles per hour), you’re going to get more cardiovascular benefit than walking for the same amount of time.” This is especially true for those who already maintain a level of moderate physical activity and a healthy body mass index.

For a more intensive workout with greater health benefits, try walking-running intervals.

This exercise technique involves walking to warm up then bursting into a short run (about one minute) to elevate your heartrate, then returning to walking for a couple minutes before repeating the sequence. “There’s reasonable evidence,” says Dr. Best, “that high intensity workouts can even improve blood glucose control. But interval training is harder if you’re overweight or have arthritis.”

Can you get too much of a good thing?
When you exercise, you lower your risks for all kinds of ailments,” Dr. Best said. “But if you over-exercise, you put your body at greater risk for heart disease. Ultra-endurance athletes appear to have a greater risk for heart attacks due to the chronic stress placed on their hearts.”

Ready to start a weekly walking or running routine? Remember your joints.

“For every pound of body weight, you put seven pounds of force on your knees while running,” Dr. Best said. “But, if you don’t load your joints and ligaments, you won’t know your body’s potential, and you won’t be using your joints for what they’re designed to do. Unfortunately, we don’t know the optimal amount of force you can safely put on your joints. But, patients with arthritis can be assured that exercise at a reasonable pace (such as walking) won’t make the condition worse.

“The key to all of this,” says Dr. Best, “is changing your behavior and moving more. Almost every able-bodied person can safely start a walking program. Don’t focus on the time or pace. Remember that some exercise is much better than none. The risk of inactivity is worse than the risk of smoking. You have every reason to exercise. If nothing else, be motivated to extend your life.”
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