

September 2017 PSP Article of the Month

High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) is not just for high performance athletes. It can benefit anybody looking to increase their cardiorespiratory fitness while reducing the length of their workouts.

Crunched for time? Intervals the way to go; Adding bursts of speed to walking workouts can give you positive benefits in less time

It's cheap, good for your health and easy to do, but just how fit do you get from your weekly walks around the neighbourhood? Generally, improving your fitness level requires a workout intense enough to make your heart and lungs work harder. So if your walk is more of a stroll, chances are your cardiovascular system isn't being challenged enough to become stronger and more efficient.

This doesn't mean your walk is for naught. Walkers tend to go for distance rather than speed, which is exercise enough to improve health. Study after study has proven that walking reduces many of the risk factors related to cardiovascular disease like high blood pressure, Type 2 diabetes and stress, as well as reducing the risk of developing several types of cancer.

In a time crunched world, though, it would be great if walkers could reap those benefits plus improve their fitness in less time.

Looking to create a walking program with all the value of walking, but with more bang for the buck, a Japanese research team devised an interval workout that takes half the time of traditional walking programs. It's composed of five sets of three minute bouts of low intensity walking followed by three minutes of high intensity walking (performed at an effort of at least seven on a scale of 10) for a minimum of four days per week. The total workout lasts about 30 minutes half of which is performed at a high intensity level.

The workout, which they tested on 6,400 subjects, increased peak aerobic capacity by about 10 per cent after five months and increased leg strength by about the same percentage. Blood pressure also improved.

In contrast, walkers who maintained a lower intensity walk (five on a scale of 10) for 60 minutes four days per week for five months experienced improvements to their fitness level that were only slightly higher than the control group, who were sedentary over the same period.

The findings have been substantiated by other studies that followed the same interval walking routine with some seeing increases in aerobic power by as much as 27 per cent, as well as

improved blood pressure and blood glucose levels. For those with knee problems, the program also proved effective when performed in the water.

Admittedly, the subjects involved in all these studies were middle aged or older and not physically active, which means there's little data on how well this particular interval program would work for a younger and fitter population. However, with more and more studies demonstrating the benefits of HIIT (high intensity interval training), it's likely the benefits of picking up your walking pace aren't age sensitive.

But the good news isn't just in the results. The fact that fitness and health benefits can be realized by walking for just 30 minutes is cause for celebration for busy people looking to exercise. The program also discards a popular notion that 10,000 steps a day is the only goal walkers should strive to achieve.

But before you celebrate too hard, keep in mind an interval walking workout is vastly different from the workout you're likely doing now. In fact, it's similar to the type of intervals favoured by runners and just like runners, the only way you can realize your goal is to pick up the pace.

How fast do you need to walk during the three minute speed intervals? Barring the use of an exercise app that allows you to easily monitor your pace, you need to push your intensity to the point of discomfort for the full three minutes. If you walk with a partner, your intensity should be such that you can't maintain a conversation. Keep in mind that each hard interval is followed by an easy one, so you can catch your breath and recover for three minutes in anticipation of the next bout of speedy walking.

Before we conclude, it's worth taking a moment to talk about technology. There are plenty of great apps that can help you keep track of your intervals. Type "interval timer" into the app store and take your pick. Choose one that allows you to set up a custom interval workout and lets you know when to pick up the pace and when to recover.

In the Japanese study, combining the walking interval program with technology that tracks progress resulted in near perfect compliance after four months and a 70 per cent adherence rate after 22 months.

With such positive results, it's worth changing your walking routine to a workout that's guaranteed to get you fitter in 30 minutes per day.

HIIT Walking Program

Beginner: Warm-up by walking at a slow to moderate pace for 5 mins. Walk bringing your knees up for 20 metres and heels back for 20 metres.

Walk 3 mins at your regular pace then 3 mins at a pace that you can barely keep up a conversation (approx 75% max heart rate). Continue for 5 total sets.

Cool-down by walking at a slow pace for 5 mins and perform static stretches for the thighs holding each stretch 20-30 secs x 3/muscle group.

Perform Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday for 6-8 weeks.

Intermediate/Advanced: Perform same as above but increase the intensity to a pace you can't keep up a conversation (80-90% max heart rate). Continue for 5 total sets.

Conduct the same cool-down as above.

Perform Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday for 6-8 weeks

Determine your exercise heart rate by subtracting your age from 220 and then multiplying by the prescribed percentage ie: $220 - 40 = 180 \times .75 = 135$ bpm.

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