

Nordic walking

Exercise with stability

Cross-country skiing has long been touted as one of the most effective forms of exercise because it works all of the major muscle groups. But now you don't have to ski — or even have snow — to gain some of these benefits.

In recent years, walking with poles — often called Nordic walking — has increased in popularity, particularly among older adults. Perhaps you've seen people traversing a local park with these lightweight Nordic walking poles — and wondered what they were all about.

In short, walking poles help get your upper body into the fitness game, and can help with stability, improve posture and possibly lessen the impact walking has on your joints and leg muscles.

Going Nordic

Although humans have used walking sticks and poles for ages, modern Nordic walking got its start as a summer training method of cross-country skiers in Scandinavian countries. Nordic walking has a range of styles, from basic, relaxed walking with moderate pole pushing — to more exaggerated walking with more powerful pole pushes.

The primary benefit of Nordic walking is that you use more energy than with ordinary walking of a similar intensity. Your heart rate is slightly higher, you're breathing a little harder and your body consumes more oxygen. Yet, most people don't feel as though they're working any harder. One study found that people who did Nordic walking burned about 20 percent more calories over a one-mile course than when they walked the same course in an ordinary way.

A few tips

Poles designed for Nordic walking are available in many sporting goods stores and on the Internet. They come with a number of features that may make them a worthwhile investment, including:

■ **Effective straps** — A strap covering most of your palm and the back of your hand allows you to let go of the pole grip as your arm swings back, which is proper Nordic walking technique. When you swing your arm forward, the pole grip snaps back into your hand.

■ **Adjustable length** — In terms of length, your forearm should generally be level with the ground when you grip a Nordic walking pole and plant it vertically. Adjustable-length poles allow you to experiment with varying heights to find what's most comfortable for you. In addition, you can shorten or lengthen the poles depending on terrain.

■ **Beveled rubber tips** — These offer excellent grip on a wide variety of surfaces.

Even then, study participants reported no significant difference in the sense of exertion.

The extra calorie burn may occur because Nordic walking works the muscles of your arms, shoulders, chest, back and torso more than does ordinary walking. It's similar to going for a walk and then performing light upper body strengthening exercises — except that you're doing both forms of exercise in a single workout.

Another benefit of Nordic walking is that it helps you main-



tain proper posture as you walk. Swinging and planting an appropriate-length pole requires a more upright posture, and it's much harder to slump into a stooped posture, which can happen with ordinary walking. Nordic walking also may help to strengthen muscles in the upper back and may even help maintain bone mineral density in the upper spine.

Many who practice Nordic walking claim that the exercise is easier on the hips, knees and lower back than is ordinary walking. However, scientific evidence to support this has been mixed. Regardless of joint impact, walking poles may help give you the balance and stability you need to stay mobile and feel more confident in using walking as exercise.

Pole position

Arm and leg movements with Nordic walking are the same as with ordinary walking. To get the pole timing down, it may help to take a few strides without touching the pole tip to the ground. Next, take some strides while lightly dragging the pole tip on the ground. Finally, start planting the pole tip with gentle force. As you gradually increase pole force, your stride should feel as if it's getting at least some assistance from your arms.

Just as with beginning any new exercise, start at an easy level and gradually increase effort. □