

Stretch before every walk

Sunscreen, breathable clothing, and good walking shoes are all things worth bringing along on your walk. Tight muscles are not. Going into your walk with stiff muscles can impede your workout by reducing power output and speed, says Carolyn Appel, C.S.C.S., a personal trainer. Make the four walking stretches below part of your warmup. They'll help lubricate your joints, promote circulation, and prepare your body mentally and physically for the road ahead.

Walking Stretch #1: Standing Hamstring Stretch: Tight, weak hamstrings—the muscles on the backs of your thighs—are an extremely common result of time spent sitting, says Terecita “Ti” Blair, a SilverSneakers instructor. They’re also often the cause of chronic low back pain, she says. When your hamstrings aren’t strong or flexible enough, the low back ends up taking on a lot of pressure during normal daily activities—walking included. This stretch aims to loosen up both the hamstrings and the low back. Using a tree trunk or wall for support, place your hands about hip height against the surface. Step back with both feet, and hinge forward at your hips, keeping your abdominals in. Straighten your legs without locking out the knees, and reach your arms forward while pushing into the tree or wall for support to prevent collapsing in your chest. Think of elongating your back to keep your pelvis in the correct position—no tucking! Hinge forward so your body forms an upside-down L shape or as far as comfortable. You’ll feel the stretch in the backs of your legs. Hold here for three to five deep breaths.

Walking Stretch #2: Chest Expansion and Upper-Back Mobilizer: You might not think you need to loosen up your upper body for a walk, but these muscles are vital to good posture, gait performance, and breathing capacity. Stand tall with your feet hip-width apart. Inhale as you reach your arms behind you with thumbs down, and clasp your fingers behind your back. Reach your clasped hands a little farther back as you lift your chest, allowing your upper back to arch slightly. You’ll feel your chest opening. On your exhale, release the clasp and take your arms forward, grabbing hold of one wrist for a deeper stretch. Gently round your upper back, allowing your chin to come to your chest and your pelvis to tuck slightly. That’s one rep. Do five to 10 reps total, moving with your breath.

Walking Stretch #3: Lunging Hip Flexor Stretch: If you spend much time sitting—which pretty much everyone does—the muscles in the fronts of your legs, like your quads and hip flexors, are probably tight. That’s problematic, since your hip flexors are key in stretching your leg behind you when taking long strides and in lifting your leg high to step over objects. You can perform this stretch next to a tree or wall for support if needed. Kneel on your left knee. Place your right foot flat on the floor in front of you, knee bent. Shift your hips forward slightly, keeping your back straight and stretching your left hip toward the floor. Squeeze your butt, which will allow you to stretch your hip flexor even more. You should feel the stretch in the top of your back leg. Hold this position for 30 seconds to one minute, taking deep breaths. Switch sides and repeat.

Walking Stretch #4: Standing Bent-Over Calf Stretch: Stand with your right foot in front of your left foot. Keep your front (right) knee straight and bend your back (left) knee as you fold forward at the hips. With your left hand, grab onto your front (right) foot underneath your toes. Think about sending your butt back to prevent rounding your spine. From here, make sure you have your balance first, and then pull up gently on your toes, feeling the stretch in your front (right) calf. Hold for at least three to five breaths. Switch sides and repeat.



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