

- Walking

HEALTH

Just Add Poles

Nordic walking is a boon for mobility and overall health

BY Katherine Ashenburg



I'M A WALKER, logging an average of 9,000 steps a day several times a week around my Toronto neighbourhood. One of walking's great charms for me is that you don't need equipment. But on recent trips to Copenhagen and Stockholm, I noticed tall, fit Scandinavians striding along on city streets with poles, as if they were cross-country skiing without any snow.

It was a revelation to learn that the addition of the poles makes it a more vigorous, full-body exercise than simply walking—and, as a 76-year-old

looking to stay healthy while enjoying the outdoors, I decided to give it a try.

There's plenty of help online for the novice Nordic walker: stand tall, swing your arms out as if to shake hands, and plant your poles with vigour. Then there's the little matter of the strap on the pole. This allows the walker to grip the pole when thrusting forward and then relax that hand as the other hand pushes forward—a feat of coordination that builds stronger muscles.

For a warm-up, I started slow: Nordic walking down the hall that extends from my front door to the deck. In case

ILLUSTRATION BY SANDI FALCONER

you're tempted to sneer, that measures 19 good strides and it wasn't easy. As I struggled to propel the right arm out while the left leg stepped—all while gripping and releasing properly—I was reminded of *The Centipede's Dilemma*, a 19th-century poem about a poor arthropod who, when asked how she walked, had no idea what to answer.

Coordinating the movements wasn't my only problem. As someone who can walk eight kilometres briskly without apparently raising my heart rate, the

NORDIC WALKING ENGAGES MORE OF YOUR MUSCLES— AND BURNS CALORIES IN THE PROCESS.

novel use of my arms and upper body was surprisingly strenuous. After half an hour, my heart was pounding and I was sweating, but I still wasn't much good.

I pressed on, because there's no arguing with the exercise's benefits. Nordic walkers' upper-body exercise increases their heart rate significantly more than walking without poles. A 2009 study published in the *Journal of Strength and Conditioning Research* found that there's up to 23 per cent more oxygen delivered to the tissues.

And according to Boston cardiologist Dr Aaron Baggish, with poles “you're engaging 80 to 90 per cent of

your muscles, as opposed to 50 per cent, providing a substantial calorie-burning benefit.”

Cross-country skiers in Finland were early practitioners of Nordic walking as a way of training off-season. In the early 1990s, it was adopted in North America as a rehabilitation tool. Peter Burrill, head of the Nordic Pole Walking programme at InsideOut Physiotherapy in Toronto, says he's seen the exercise speed up the post-surgical recovery of patients with new hips and knees.

It also helps people with Parkinson's, says Burrill: “We put poles in their hands and it's amazing because they start walking with real rhythm.”

Meanwhile, out on the winding path near my house, I was still advancing three steps and falling back two. But after a few more clumsy days of being convinced I would never succeed, suddenly everything clicked. Not only was I able to coordinate the movements, I was aware that my heart, arms, and core were getting a workout.

Thinking back on those confident Nordic walkers I saw in Europe, I wish I could report that participating in the sport for 45 minutes a few times a week has made me tall and blonde—but something even better has happened. I found a form of exercise that adds an upper-body, aerobic component to my love of walking—and it's one I expect to enjoy for years to come. **R**