

- Walking

WELLNESS

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walk

Weirdly

pedicalqcpubliclibrary@gmail.com  
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to  
build  
muscle

A workout idea we're calling **Wacky Walking** ticks a few boxes: It helps you get stronger, busts boredom, and gets you into a playful mindset that can motivate you to keep it going!

BY STACEY COLINO  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDRE RUCKER



## WELLNESS

# Prevention's readers are walking superfans,

and for great reasons: Walking is a simple way to get exercise, costs nothing, and is something most of us can do at any time, anywhere. But even the most passionate step collector can start to feel a little blah about their routine, and it's true that the same-old, same-old won't push you through plateaus. "Any repetitive motion in one plane of motion, such as walking forward, will

activate the same muscles each time," says Amy

West, M.D., a sports medicine physician at Northwell Health in New York.

Not only does doing the same type of walk day after day get dull, but it also means you may not be working

complementary muscle groups. Mixing things up will get those muscle groups engaged, enabling you to get stronger, and may help you avoid injury from overusing the same muscles in the same way as well.

"Our muscles support our joints, so by improving muscle strength you can help reduce impact on your joints," Dr. West adds. "When you use different walking methods, different muscles are activated each time, which promotes balanced muscle development and postural alignment—and could potentially prevent future aches and pains."

Lindsey Benoit O'Connell, C.S.C.S., a certified trainer, a meditation teacher, and the founder of The LAB Wellness, agrees: "Different walking styles can help improve balance, coordination, and agility," she says. Aside from building strength throughout your body, walking in multiple ways "challenges your brain to work harder to coordinate the steps," O'Connell adds. Once you feel confident in your variations, she suggests adding intervals or "mixing up your walks during the week





by doing different styles on different days—over time, you’ll see big payoffs!”

We asked fitness experts about their favorite wacky walks and how to do them properly and safely. Next time you lace up, give these walking styles a try.

## backward walking

Physical therapists often incorporate backward walking (also called “retro walking”) into treatment plans for various leg injuries and stroke rehabilitation because it helps improve balance, coordination, and range of motion in the hips, leading to better mobility and stability, says backward-walking researcher Janet S. Dufek, Ph.D., a professor in the department of kinesiology and nutrition sciences at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Walking backward may also help you maintain a healthy weight (varying the exercises you do helps prevent you from plateauing) and reduce your levels of C-reactive protein, a marker of chronic inflammation, based on a 2023 study in which overweight individuals walked backward on a treadmill four times a week.

### ► **MUSCLES WORKED:**

**Quads, glutes**

► **TRY IT:** Simply take steps backward instead of forward. Because you won’t be able to see where you’re going, it’s smart to do this in a safe, controlled

environment—ideally on a treadmill at a slow speed so you can use the rails for balance if necessary. If you don’t have access to a treadmill, then your driveway, a flat and even area of sidewalk, or your local track should work. If you’re not walking on a treadmill, Dufek suggests recruiting a partner—they can be your eyes, and you can hold hands with them for additional support while you master this skill. Start with short bouts so your muscles can get used to the new way of moving (and don’t be surprised if they feel fatigued faster than with regular walking): “Begin with 30-second intervals and gradually extend them as you gain confidence and endurance,” O’Connell advises.

## criss-cross walking

Ever watch a clip of supermodels strutting along the runway? They lift one foot, cross it in front of the other to take a step, and continue that pattern. This is essentially how you walk criss-cross style. Walking in this manner strengthens muscles that can help you maintain good coordination, hip mobility, and balance, leading to better overall mobility and less risk of injury, says Samantha Pinkston, P.T., D.P.T., a senior physical therapist at Montefiore Medical Center in New York City.

## WELLNESS

► **MUSCLES WORKED:**

**Hip adductors**  
(in your inner thigh region),  
**hip abductors**  
(in your buttocks),  
**quads, calves**

► **TRY IT:** Start by standing with your feet hip-width apart. Lift your right foot and cross it diagonally in front of your left before lowering it to the ground. Then lift your left foot, kick out your knee, and cross it diagonally in front of your right foot in the same way. Think of it as if you're making an "X" as you stride. Tighten your buttock muscles and breathe to engage your core. "Practice on flat surfaces and avoid overexaggerating your steps to maintain your balance," says O'Connell.

## nanba walking

■ You may not have heard of Nanba walking, but you've probably seen it in movies featuring samurai warriors who walk by moving the same arm and leg in sync—a more stilted, less fluid stride than traditional walking. Research from Singapore has found that this style of walking, which originated in Japan, is more stable and energy-efficient than traditional walking, partly because it involves less twisting of the body and

# 25%

**THE REDUCTION IN DEMENTIA RISK  
ASSOCIATED WITH WALKING  
3,800 STEPS A DAY, RESEARCH SHOWS**

promotes greater integration between the upper body and the lower body. It can also promote mindfulness because it causes you to really focus on your movements, says Latreal Mitchell, a personal trainer and the founder of MEI Wellness.

► **MUSCLES WORKED:**

**Core, glutes**

► **TRY IT:** Stand with your feet hip-width apart and your arms hanging loosely by your sides. Bend your knees slightly, as if you were holding a mini squat. Try to stay in this position as you move, as "it's key for engaging the glutes and keeping the focus there so you don't end up relying on bigger muscles in your legs to do all the work," says O'Connell. Step forward with your right leg, moving your right arm forward with it; then step forward with your left leg and bring your left arm forward. Focus on your posture, engaging your core and maintaining an open chest, Mitchell advises. "It's going to feel awkward at first," O'Connell says, so practice slowly, and then ramp up.

This is a great movement to incorporate into a warm-up before or a cooldown following your usual walking workout.

## side-stepping

■ Also known as lateral walking, it's when you walk sideways with relatively small steps, similarly to how a crab scuttles across the sand. You can boost the effort by incorporating a resistance band once you've gotten the form down. Side-stepping improves balance, flexibility, and pelvic stability, which can help prevent falls and injuries that could interrupt your lifestyle and walking routine.

### ► **MUSCLES WORKED:**

**Hips, inner thigh muscles, lower leg muscles, core, glutes**

► **TRY IT:** Stand up straight with your feet nearly touching, knees slightly bent, and your chest lifted. Keeping your feet facing forward, step to the side with your right foot and quickly bring the left one to meet it. Continue this pattern, taking 10 steps to the right and pausing, then taking 10 steps to the left. "Keep the steps small to maintain control," O'Connell suggests. When you're ready to add a resistance band, position it around your ankles or right above your knees and then perform the steps above. Having the band around your ankles works your lower leg muscles more, whereas

placing it above your knees makes your glutes and hips work harder.

## skipping

■ Conjure your inner child and spend some time skipping. "It provides cardiovascular benefits and is good for bone density," Mitchell says. "It's like a gentler form of running." In fact, East Carolina University researchers found that skipping was lower-impact and reduced the load on the joints compared with running. "Skipping also involves coordination and balance—very important as we age," Dr. West notes.

### ► **MUSCLES WORKED:**

**Quads, glutes, core—plus, cardio!**

► **TRY IT:** Start by standing with your feet hip-width apart. Step forward and hop on your right foot as you lift your left foot off the ground, then step forward and hop on your left foot as you lift your right foot. Continue the pattern from there. During a regular forward walk, you can try incorporating 15-second bursts of skipping every block or two, O'Connell says. As you get stronger and more comfortable, you can lengthen your skipping stride to increase the challenge—and the benefits.



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