

Walk Like a Norwegian

The sport of Nordic walking is more popular than ever.

Poles aren't just for holding up beans—they're now part of a fun new way to ramp up your regular walk. It's called Nordic walking, a sport that got its foothold in Finland and is now spreading across the United States as more and more Americans embrace it for its ability to build strength, endurance, muscle tone, and bone density. Specially designed walking poles transform a serene stroll into a whole-body workout, boosting heart rate and burning calories up to 46 percent faster than walking alone, according to a study done by The Cooper Institute in Texas. The poles take stress off joints, too, while offering a propelling push that gives the impression that you're not working harder, even though you are. The International Nordic Walking Association calls it one of the fastest-growing recreational fitness sports in the world.

—BERIT THORKELSON

GETTING EQUIPPED

Poles are the only extra gear you need for Nordic walking. Popular brands include Excel, Leki, Swix, Exerstrider, and Fittrek. Most come with instructions, including a DVD. Here are two different picks we tried and liked:

■ Leki "Instructor" telescoping poles are light with a comfortable grip and easy-to-adjust straps. \$150, at sporting goods stores.

■ Exerstrider "OS2" telescoping poles have a flared grip, not a strap, to keep your hand in place, making them easy to grab and go. Your height, rather than pole height, is listed on the pole shaft for easy adjustment. \$89.95; walkingpoles.com or 800/554-0989.

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STEP 1

Grip the poles so the tips touch the ground by your heels. Your arm should form a right angle, forearms parallel to the ground. Align the rubber-boot shape pole tips so the toes face rearward.

STEP 2

Begin to walk, letting your poles drag behind you. If they have hand straps, don't use them for now. Hold the grips as loosely as possible, says Lynn McPhelimy, a certified Nordic walking instructor in Connecticut.

STEP 3

Keep walking and begin to swing your arms naturally. Once that feels comfortable, extend your arms a little farther than usual. Grip the poles a little more tightly, noticing how they grab the ground at the top of the swing.

STEP 4

Concentrate on the point at the top of your swing when your tips catch. Push the pole into the ground firmly and use them to propel yourself forward. You'll feel your core muscles come into play.

STEP 5

Keep your grip loose and fluid. The pole should strike at a 45- to 60-degree angle, not straight up and down. Aim for 10 to 30 minutes of walking at first, says Lynn Wachtel, organizer of the Urbana, Illinois, Nordic Walking Club.