

Racewalking with COPD



Mike McBride and Stephen Gaudet, COPD sufferer and severe asthmatic, respectively, racewalked the 2009 and 2010 Boston Marathons.

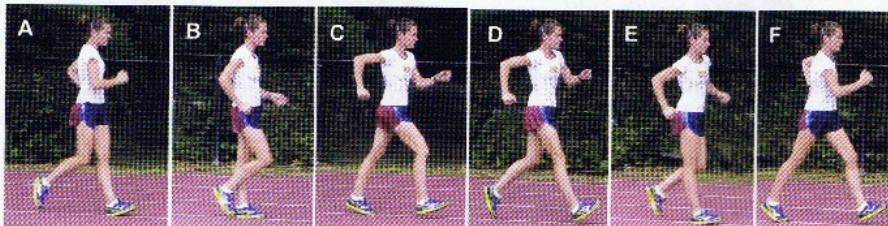
By Dave McGovern ©2010

Walking is a terrific exercise for breathing-challenged individuals. It's low-intensity and low-impact, so nearly anyone can do it, and it requires very little in the way of expensive equipment—a good pair of shoes and comfortable clothing are all you need to get going.

Once you've embarked on a walking program, it's easy to build to longer distances and faster paces—up to a point. The problem is that most people find that it can be extremely difficult to increase walking speed beyond a 12- to 15-minutes-per-mile pace (four to five miles per hour.) And in most cases the limitation isn't respiratory, it's mechanical: after a certain point it becomes exceedingly difficult to "spin your wheels" any faster. That can be a big problem if your goal is to improve your pulmonary function. The only way to get fitter in any activity is to constantly "raise the bar" in your training.

In the weight room, you can lift ever-heavier weights as you get stronger; when running or cycling you can run or cycle faster as you get fitter. But when walking, most people hit a wall at that four- to five-miles-per-hour barrier that they just can't break through no matter how hard they try.

That's where racewalking comes in. Yes, race walking! Although an Olympic sport for over 100 years—yes, really!—racewalking is also a great fitness activity for the nonelite. The technique that allows Olympic athletes to cruise at nearly ten miles per hour (6:00 minutes per mile!) may allow you to continue improving your fitness far beyond what you would be able to achieve with the walking technique you learned as a toddler. And even if you don't ever plan to compete, you can use elements of Olympic racewalking technique to dramatically increase your walking speed, allowing you to get in more miles and burn more calories in a shorter period of time. As an added benefit, racewalking is much easier on the joints than running.



This racewalker uses her feet well (A), pushing off with the tips of her toes on the right, and landing very close to her body on the left heel. The right knee bends, driving forward vigorously (B). Her arms drive very powerfully to the rear (C). The right leg straightens just before heel-contact (D). The right leg is straight, helping to "vault" the body forward (E). The right foot is beginning to push off the ground, helping to send the racewalker forward into the next stride (F).

Here are a few tips to help you to rev up your walking:

- 1. Take quicker steps.** Most "pedestrian" walkers take long, slow strides; racewalkers take shorter, faster steps. Elite racewalkers far exceed the cadence rates of elite runners at the same distance, with some taking over 230 steps per minute!
- 2. Use your feet.** Actively using your feet rather than just pick them up and plopping them down, will allow you to both take quicker steps and longer strides.
- 3. Bend your elbows.** Doing so will allow you to pump your arms faster, resulting in faster steps. Also, pump your arms vigorously behind your body, using a much shorter stroke in the front—the hands should cross to the center-line of your body in front of the belly-button.

Keep in mind that racewalking is a much more vigorous activity than "regular" walking. Start out slowly, perhaps adding short 1- to 2-minute bouts of racewalking to your regular walking workout. As your fitness improves, increase the duration of the racewalking bouts and shorten the regular walking breaks.

Dave McGovern, a member of the US National Racewalk Team, has a Master's degree in sport science with a concentration in sports medicine. Visit his web site at www.racewalking.org.





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