Great Strides
Stepping up your walking program can burn serious calories.

Some people can lose weight and keep it off without regular exercise but, chances are, you’re not one of them. In fact, the vast majority of people aren’t. Of those on the National Weight Control Registry—the biggest, longest-running survey of people who have lost at least 30 pounds and kept it off for more than a year—over 90 percent use physical activity to ensure their continued success.

Walking about an hour a day is their exercise of choice, something that is no surprise to Dr. Anne McTiernan, director of the Prevention Center at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle. She and her colleagues found that sedentary people who simply began to walk briskly, 60 minutes a day, six days a week—no dieting involved—saw big improvements in their health.
Fitness walking is by far the most popular form of exercise. About 77 million Americans say it’s their main form of activity.

Over the course of a year, the women lost 5 pounds and the men over 8 pounds. Importantly, they also decreased their belly fat—the riskiest kind—by 10 to 20 percent.

“We picked walking because it’s easy, convenient, and most people can do it without injury,” McTernan says.

While almost any kind of walking is beneficial for weight loss, a few minor tweaks can have you burning a significant number of extra calories, making your goals even more attainable. Here are two such programs to try.

**HIGH INTENSITY INTERVAL TRAINING**

How would you like to burn more calories and increase your fitness level without spending any more time exercising? HIIT, or high intensity interval training, does exactly that. It involves short bursts of strenuous exercise alternated with lower intensity recovery periods.

In the same way that flooring your car at every green light burns extra gas, the high intensity periods of HIIT burn extra calories, to the tune of about 25 to 50 percent more than a regular walk. As a bonus, HIIT changes the structure of your muscle cells so that, over time, they get better at burning fat instead of their normal fuel—carbohydrates.

Almost anyone can do HIIT. “But if you’ve been sedentary, it’s best to first focus on building consistency and duration, before you turn to intensity,” says Carla Sottovia, Ph.D., assistant fitness director and lead personal trainer at the Cooper Fitness Center in Dallas. Once you’ve done that, you’re ready to go.

One of the best things about HIIT is that it doesn’t require a highly structured program, so it’s easy to remember on the fly. Here’s the technique in a nutshell:

- Warm up for 10-15 minutes by gradually bringing yourself up to your normal fitness walking pace. Don’t skip this step, because warming up is an important way to prevent injuries.
- Interval train for the next 20-25 minutes. Start with a ratio of 1:1—that is, one minute of fast walking followed by one minute of lower-intensity recovery walking. Push yourself hard for that first minute or so, then slow down for about a minute. Repeat this pattern for 20 minutes. During the intense segments, you should be breathing hard enough to find it difficult to talk. On a scale of 1 to 10, in which 1 is lying on the couch and 10 is panting and gasping for air, you should be at 8 or 9. On the recovery, you should be at 5 or 6.
- Cool down for 10-15 minutes by walking at a normal pace. A cool-down period speeds recovery and eases stiffness the next day, so always build in time for one.
- Once you are comfortable with the technique of intervals, play around with the ratio. Well-conditioned walkers often use a ratio of 2:1—two minutes of fast walking for every minute of recovery. The super-fit aim for a ratio of 3:1. Or, if you want to increase effort while staying with the 1:1 ratio, add a set of 2- or 3-pound hand weights to make your walks more challenging.
POLE (NORDIC) WALKING

You’ve probably seen people walking with poles and wondered if they had somehow misplaced their skis. You’re not far off—Nordic walking began as a way for cross-country skiers to stay in shape during the warmer seasons.

A study at the Cooper Institute of Dallas found that people who used walking poles increased their calorie-burning by over 20 percent, with no increased sense of exertion. And poles are great for stabilizing yourself on uneven terrain, or to take some impact off your legs if you’re carrying some extra weight or have osteoarthritis in the knees, hips, or feet.

And if you really use your arms by extending them farther out and pushing down on the poles as you walk (which also involves your core muscles), you can boost your calorie expenditure by as much as 70 percent, says Tom Rutlin, one of the country’s best-known walking pole experts. “It’s like working against resistance on a weight machine,” he says.

Expect to pay $70–$100 for a decent pair of poles. A good beginner set is the OS2 Fitness Trekker, which you can find for about $90 at walkingpoles.com. Once you’re equipped, here’s how to start:

■ Grip the poles so the tips touch the ground by your heels. Your forearms should be parallel to the ground. The poles have rubber-booted tips, each with a toe that juts out. Turn the toes so they face rearward.

■ Begin to walk, letting the poles drag lightly behind you. Hold the grips loosely 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, letting them grab the ground at the top of the swing.

■ As they grab, push the pole into the ground and use it to propel yourself forward. Repeat with each stride. Keep your grip fluid. The pole should strike at a 45- to 60-degree angle, not straight up and down.

■ For maximum weight loss, Rutlin recommends pole walking at least 30 minutes most weekdays. On the weekend, go for one Nordic walk for as long as you can manage.
The Shoe Fits
Good shoes are essential to injury prevention. Since they break down with time and use, replace shoes every year. And invest in proper walking socks, such as Drymax, drymaxsocks.com ($20 for a 3-pack), to prevent blisters.

1. IF YOU USE Treadmills, other aerobic machines
TRY New Balance WX1010
This shoe has a breathable lining that keeps feet cool and dry, even while sweating. The versatile WX1010 also is good for light outdoor jogs. $100, newbalance.com

2. IF YOU USE Unpaved trails, hiking routes
TRY Merrell Chameleon Arc Stretch
Bigger, deeper treads give better traction. Built for additional stability, even when the going gets a little slippery or tricky. $100, merrell.com

3. IF YOU USE Sidewalks, malls, paved trails
TRY Saucony Omni
Hard surfaces are tough on joints. The Omni is a lace-on shock absorber: An internal grid system promotes stability and lessens impact. $90, saucony.com

Pavement-Pounding Pooches
Dog owners know that no creature on earth gets more excited about a W-A-L-K. And it's even a little contagious. One study showed that dog owners get almost twice as much exercise as those without dogs—for a total of about an hour a day, most days of the week.

If you like the thought of a canine walking companion, here are some common sense things to keep in mind, courtesy of Jenna Stregowski, RVT, a registered veterinary technician at Georgia Veterinary Specialists in Atlanta and the dog expert for the website DogsAbout.com:

- Almost any dog, any age, can be trained to walk on a leash, but it's best to start young. Familiarize your puppy with a collar and leash in the house starting at 6 weeks, but don't walk around unfamiliar dogs until your pup has had all of his parvo (potentially fatal virus) vaccines, at around 4 months. Professional training produces the happiest walkers. Contact your local Animal Rescue League to find a good training program.

- Easiest to walk are herders, such as Australian and German shepherds, collies, and corgis. Harder: pullers, like huskies and malamutes, and muscular, strong-willed dogs— mastiffs, Great Danes, dobermans, and American bulldogs.

- Male dogs and trackers (beagles and terriers, for example) love to stop and sniff, and mark their turf. Compromise. Allow them one or two special spots to do this, but keep them on task the rest of the time or you'll never be able to break a sweat.

- Most trainers recommend a front-attaching harness that discourages pulling (brands include Easy Walk or Gentle Leader, found at pet stores). Couple the harness with an adjustable standard leash. Forget retractable leashes, which encourage pulling, and choke collars, which can damage a dog's airway.

- Want to practice before you purchase? Plenty of animal shelters welcome volunteer dog-walkers for as little or as much time as you can devote.