

How to Winterize Your Walk Program

BY MACKENZIE LOBBY

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While dropping temperatures and falling snow force many well-intentioned exercisers inside during winter, a few adjustments to your walking routine can make it viable year-round. In fact, a recent study found that when it comes to keeping weight off, taking regular 30-minute brisk walks is better than going to the gym to do activities such as swimming, tennis or dance classes.

Surely you could do your walking inside on a track or treadmill, but there are plenty of reasons you may opt to get outside. There's no denying that a little fresh air can do you good, especially when you're stuck inside for most of the day. A recent study abstract showed that a walk in nature even has the potential to boost mood; other studies have emphasized the importance of getting out and about during daylight hours to boost serotonin levels. This is important because serotonin is a proven appetite suppressant that naturally helps to curb food cravings.

Moreover, exercising when the mercury drops may also have its benefits, as research has suggested that cooler temperatures can assist in weight loss because the body has to work a little harder — and thus burn more calories — to keep it at 98.6°F.

To winterize your walk program, follow these simple tips. You may even find that you come to enjoy your peaceful strolls out in the winter elements.

1. Layer strategically.

Choosing a proper ensemble can mean the difference between an enjoyable winter walk and a bone-chilling trek. Be sure to choose a moisture-wicking bottom layer to wear directly against your skin. This means avoiding cotton at all costs. Cotton will only retain sweat and leave you feeling chilled. If you're in the market for long underwear,

look for synthetic fabrics, merino wool or silk. On top of that, include a warmth layer. Many people prefer a fleece or down-insulated jacket. For your outer layer, get your hands on a shell that will block the wind. Cold, blustery winds will cut right through those warm layers if you don't have a good shell to top it all off.

2. Get the right accessories.

Keeping your head, hands and feet warm is imperative when it comes to winter walking. For your head, choose a warm hat that comes down over your ears completely. In especially cold temperatures, a face mask or neck warmer will not only contribute to comfort, but they will also protect your skin from windburn. The same layering strategy you used for your core should be applied to your hands, so a pair of gloves or mittens that have an inner layer for warmth and an outer layer for wind protection are generally preferred. The best socks for the job will be made with a moisture-wicking material — many people prefer a merino wool — that are thick enough to keep your feet warm but not so bulky you can't fit your feet into your shoes.

3. Plan footwear accordingly.

Not only should you consider warmth when choosing your winter-walking footwear, but you also need to keep traction in mind. If you have a light pair of winter boots that are easy to walk in, those will suffice. Hiking boots or shoes are also good options.

Additionally, a number of brands make winter walking and running shoes that use sturdier and more wind-resistant upper materials. If you'll be out in the ice and snow, pay attention to the quality of the outsoles. Do they have deep rubber lugs that will keep you upright on sketchy winter terrain? If you're worried about wipeouts, you can purchase traction devices that strap to your shoes and help dig into slippery ice and snow.

4. Be safe.

Winter means fewer hours of daylight, so if you'll be out before sunrise or after sunset, it's important to make yourself visible to oncoming traffic. Consider throwing on a reflective safety vest over your jacket or get reflective straps to put around your arms and ankles. A flashlight or headlamp can also come in handy to light the path in front of you.

5. Don't forget the sunscreen.

If you plan on doing most of your walking in the daylight hours, don't underestimate the power of the sun. While the UV levels may be lower than they are in the summer, the sun's rays can reflect off the snow and give you a nasty sunburn. To avoid the burn (and silly-looking tan lines), apply sunscreen a few minutes before you head out the door. If you're susceptible to dry skin in the winter, this can also help keep your face moisturized.

6. Phone a friend.

While you will generally warm up after just a few minutes of walking, getting out the door in the first place can feel like pulling teeth on a brisk day. When you have a walking buddy, you'll be less likely to skip your walk. Find a neighbor or friend who likes to get out and about in colder temperatures, and set a couple of dates a week to help keep you committed through the winter months.

7. Know when to take it inside.

There are plenty of great reasons to continue walking outside year-round, but once in a while, it's better to throw in the towel and hit up the treadmill instead. If windchills are in the dangerous category, making you susceptible to frostbite in a short amount of time, opt for an indoor walk. Or if conditions are excessively icy, you'll be better off logging miles inside than risking a fall that would cut short your entire winter-walking regimen. Watch the weather and use common sense, and you'll be able to enjoy a walk outside another day.