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A walking woman's guide to the concrete jungle

by Elizabeth O'Brien

IN A COUNTRY WHERE NEARLY half of all health clubs offer walking programs, where suburbia is gripped by "mall walking" mania, and where walking shoes are a \$1.85 billion business (and the fastest-growing segment of the ever-expanding athletic-shoe industry), the 70 million Americans who walk for fitness are well covered. But while special publications abound with advice on hiking, racewalking, and the latest treadmill workouts, those of us with more pedestrian concerns—getting from point A to point B—need to do a little legwork.

Walking erect was a triumph 3.5 million years ago; add evolutionary advances like high heels and Filofax-stuffed purses, and "survival of the fittest" takes on a new meaning. "People don't realize that everyday walking can cause foot, knee, and back problems," says Mary Lloyd Ireland, an orthopedic surgeon in Kentucky and a physician for the 1992 U.S. Olympic team. As much as we try to heed the popular advice to ambulate everywhere, walking's salubrious effects are negated when a ten-pound bag dangling from one shoulder torques our back out of whack and a lead-with-the-chin stride strains neck, back, and shoulder muscles.

In the '80s, working women made well-intentioned if sartorially inept attempts to stave off musculoskeletal calamities. But in trading their pumps for marshmallow-like sneakers and strapping on backpacks, they trekked urban landscapes looking like bands of errant power-suited campers. Today, most find that image doesn't work for them, nor does the hobbled-hunchback look. News flash: Those aren't the only choices. You can have your T-straps and walk in them too.

What it takes is a few subtle techniques—some so subtle as to border on the barely tangible, such as the Zen-like approach used by self-styled walking experts like New York City's Deena and David Balboa, who help people "fine-tune" or "regain" their walk in classes they've been teaching in Central Park for nearly ten years. The Balboas are easy to find: They're the ones walking backward.

"Retrowalking" is a little trick the Balboas use to "remind" the foot of its ability to move through its entire range of motion, from toe to heel—important >

urban trekker

because that roll distributes your weight evenly, not overtaxing any one muscle or bone group. Weird as the exercise may look, it works. Once you turn it around, the natural heel-to-toe roll is more pronounced, the back leg extends more fully, and you have no choice but to stand more erect.

Balancing on one foot with eyes closed is another reminder technique, used by Phillip Kwong, MD, a foot-and-ankle orthopedist at Los Angeles's Kerlan-Jobe Clinic. Kwong, who treats players on the Dodgers, Angels, Lakers, and Rams, says standing on one foot at least once a day is one of the fastest ways to find out which foot, ankle, and leg muscles you use to maintain equilibrium—and thus to discover if one joint or muscle group is being overstressed.

Once you're on the street, become aware of your walking habits. If, like most women, you've trained yourself to stare at the ground to avoid eye contact with strangers, David Balboa suggests lifting your chin slightly to ease tightness in the neck and shoulders (usually pinned on chronic tension). If you tend to carry your purse on your "nonworking" side, make an effort to alternate sides, say every fifteen minutes. If you slap your feet down flat-footed—which jars the knees, hips, and back—be conscious of rolling your foot from heel to toe. And rather than obsess about shoe-heel height (though more than an inch and a half increases the risk of problems, many experts say), find a pump with a flexible sole and a roomy toe area that allows for a broad range of movement.

As for pace, it's not the speed, it's the motion: Try a single, steady pace to prevent overstriding, which makes the heel strike the ground hard, accumulating trauma in the back and shoulders. If your neck or shoulders habitually tense, side-to-side head rolls force stubborn muscles to stretch and relax.

Just as there is no single best technique, there is no perfect walking shoe—though women spent \$1.14 billion last year hopping. "If you're used to heels, don't suddenly switch to flats," says Carol Frey, MD, an associate professor of orthopedic surgery at the University of Southern California. To avoid abrupt stress on the Achilles tendon, Frey suggests regular calf and hamstring stretches and a very gradual move to lower heels.

"People come into my office thinking there is an ideal walking shoe," Kwong says. "For

example, while flats are great in principle, they're not very comfortable for people with flat feet: A one-inch or stacked heel—a wide base provides greater stability—works better for them." Thomas Novella, DPM, agrees. For someone with back or knee problems, the Manhattan podiatrist, who counts New York City Ballet principals and professional marathoners in his patient base, recommends more

Beyond the backpack

Load around more than 10 percent of your body weight and you're asking for trouble, says orthopedist Carol Frey (which means that here at *Mirabella*, where a surprise inspection turned up staff tote bags weighing between three and fifteen pounds, a few of us are in trouble). Hang that weight from one shoulder and "you give yourself a leg-length discrepancy, a pelvic obliquity, functional scoliosis," says physical therapist John-Claude Saliel. All of which has a nasty habit of manifesting itself as knee, hip, back, neck, and shoulder pain.

The solution: "Keeping any extra weight centered and balanced on your lower torso, where your body was designed to carry it," Frey says. While a backpack may seem the obvious solution, it's not the only one. Any bag with a strap long enough to wear across the chest (like these from Lana Marks, below left, and Paloma Picasso, below right) will position the weight in front of the pelvis (the body's center of gravity), distribute the weight evenly, and minimize torque. Belt packs (like this one from Ralph Lauren, bottom) and fanny packs do the same job. —E.O'B.



supportive, lace-up oxford styles to help stabilize the bones of the midfoot and shore up the arches to prevent lower-back sway.

The whole idea is not to do anything drastic. "Postural habits develop over a lifetime," says John-Claude Saliel, a physical therapist at the Columbia Presbyterian Center for Sports Medicine in New York City. "You can't change your body mechanics all at once." Taking it slow and easy will make getting around the concrete jungle a little less punishing. □



The way you walk

Gait analysis has become the latest perk offered to health-club members (either free or for a nominal fee). A method of detecting irregularities in a person's walk that may cause pain or discomfort, gait analysis was originally performed in a lab and involved attaching electrodes to specific muscles and videotaping (from three angles) the subject walking on a treadmill. The analysis done at health clubs is more likely to range from simple observation to videotaping and observation.

Since there is no professional certification for gait analysis, its value depends on the expertise of the observer, which can range from a personal trainer to an on-staff podiatrist, who "may be there just to promote his or her own business," orthopedist Carol Frey warns.

"This is not science," she adds. Beware of anyone who automatically suggests orthotics (shoe inserts that provide cushioning or corrective support) or calls them a "cure" (like eyeglasses, orthotics are a crutch, not a cure, says orthopedist Phillip Kwong); doesn't examine shoe wear or callus buildup (obvious indicators of walking patterns); or blames your walk for all your maladies ("from headaches to infertility," Frey says).

If you're not in pain, the professional consensus is to skip gait analysis. Instead, self-evaluation can help. "Look at the shoes you wear a lot," Frey says. "If there's too much wear on the inside, you overpronate"; a shoe with a higher arch can stabilize the foot. Corns are usually a sign of too-tight shoes; try a half-size or a size larger. A wet footprint can also indicate walking patterns: If it shows a full, flat foot you may need a shoe with more midfoot support. —E.O'B.