Warm up those muscles.

Begin each walk at a slow, leisurely pace for up to 5 minutes. Once your muscles feel warm and your heart rate increases, you can quicken your pace. During the walk, maintain a pace of 2.5 to 3.5 miles per hour—fast enough to walk 1 mile in 17-24 minutes.

Lower-Your-Cholesterol Walking Workout!

Walking is wonderful for weight loss, and it also can help ward off heart disease. That’s because a daily walk lowers artery-clogging LDL cholesterol while raising the good HDL cholesterol that helps keep arteries clear. We asked Grace DeSimone, a wellness specialist who develops corporate walking programs at Plus One Fitness Management in New York City, to create a plan that anyone can do—whether you’re a beginner looking for motivation or a walker in need of variation. If you’re new to exercise, take it slow and steady—that’s the key to long-term success. Now, lace up your sneakers and let’s get started.

Weeks 1 and 2

Your Goal:
Make It a Habit

Commit to walking 2-3 days a week at first. Don’t worry about walking for a specific amount of time or distance. What you want is to determine a base line to build upon. Do this by measuring one of three factors:

How Long? Determine how long you can comfortably walk. You may be able to walk for only 10 or 15 minutes at a time—and that’s enough, for now.

How Far? Measure the distance you can comfortably walk. Is it around the block once or twice? Can you walk a lap at the local high school track? Can you do more?

How Many Steps? Use a pedometer to count how many steps you take during an entire day, in addition to your walk. (A 15-minute jaunt is about 2,000 steps). The American Heart Association recommends an average of 10,000 steps a day to boost heart health. Put on a pedometer to find out how close you are to that number. Once you know your starting point, you can slowly start to build on it. For the first two weeks, though, just maintain your initial level of activity to help you get into the routine of walking.

Why walking works:
Even if your doctor prescribed statins, walking is still a smart move. That’s because statin therapy, while helpful, does little to raise HDL (good) cholesterol. A regular walking program will help boost HDL in most people. Plus, research shows that losing as little as 5-10 pounds may produce a significant drop in cholesterol levels.
WHY WALKING WORKS: An Austrian study found that exercisers who walked both up and down a steep mountain reported lower LDL levels than those who walked on flatter terrain. No surprise there. However, uphill walkers saw a larger reduction in their LDL, as well as a drop in triglycerides (a blood fat that affects heart health). Another eye-opener: Downhill walkers saw a significant improvement in their blood sugar levels, thereby reducing the risk of diabetes. No mountains near you? Climbing a set of stairs will bring similar results.

WHY WALKING WORKS: Although you can break up your walks into two 15- or 20-minute walks each day, it’s better to make time for one long walk. A British study found that people who walked 20-40 minutes each day reported bigger drops in cholesterol than those who walked in split shifts.

WHY WALKING WORKS: Research shows that expending 800 to 1,200 calories per week during exercise is what it takes to raise HDL cholesterol. It adds up fast: Walking at a moderate pace of 3 miles per hour burns about 300 calories. If you walk 30 minutes a day just 3 times a week, that’s almost 1,000 calories each week!

COOL DOWN
Aim for a 5-minute cool-down period, walking at a slower, more leisurely pace. Follow with these stretches to improve mobility and reduce injury and soreness.

WALKER’S STRETCH
Why it’s great: Releases tension from thighs.
Hold onto a wall or other stable surface with your right hand for balance. Bend your left knee and bring your left heel behind you, grabbing it with your left hand. Inhale and gently pull your heel toward your buttocks. You should feel a stretch in the front of your left leg. Hold stretch and breathe for 30-60 seconds. Repeat on the other side.

PRETZEL STRETCH
Why it’s great: Stretches hips, lower back and buttocks. Relieves tension associated with standing, walking or jogging. Sit on a step or chair. Place your left ankle on your right knee. Make sure the right knee is directly over the right heel. Take a deep breath in and then, as you exhale, lean forward from your waist. Hold stretch and breathe for 30-60 seconds.

—Joanne Van Zuidam