



Ask the Expert with Dr. Darrell Menard

Find Answers to your Sport Medicine Questions!

Nordic Walking – Give it a try!

Q: *I really enjoy walking and it's been my primary fitness activity for many years. During a recent workout, my best friend showed up with walking poles and spent the entire workout telling me how great they are. I have seen people using them but assumed they were just getting ready for the cross country ski season. Is pole walking a more effective form of exercise than regular walking or just the latest fitness fad? Walkin Wanda.*

A: Dear Walkin Wanda: Pole walking, or Nordic walking as it is more commonly known, was first developed in Finland in the early 1990s. It was initially developed as a conditioning activity to help cross country skiers stay fit during the summer but it rapidly evolved into a fitness activity with worldwide popularity.

Nordic walking offers a number of benefits over and above those you can get from regular walking. Using poles to help propel you forward requires working the muscles of your arms, shoulders, chest, back and neck. In fact, Nordic walking uses 90% of your body's muscles while regular walking only uses 40%. This additional load not only helps you strengthen all of these muscles but it also significantly increases the number of calories you burn while walking. Using more muscles also increases the cardiovascular demands made on your body and this will help improve the efficiency of your heart and lungs.

One of the major advantages of Nordic walking is that it reduces the load on your lower body and so is better tolerated by people who have osteoarthritis in their ankles, knees and hips. People who are recovering from lower body surgery can also use Nordic walking to get back to being active sooner. Improved balance, better posture and increased core strength are other significant benefits that have been shown to occur with regular Nordic walking.

The bottom line is that Nordic walking has been shown to be an excellent form of exercise that is low impact in nature and offers you more of a full body workout than regular walking. You can do it pretty much anywhere. Some poles are collapsible so that you can easily carry them in your luggage when you travel. Give Nordic walking a try, you may be surprised how a set of poles can help you reach your fitness goals.

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Dr. Darrell Menard is the Surgeon General's specialist advisor in sport medicine. He has worked extensively with athletes from multiple sports and has covered Canadian teams competing at multiple games including the 2012 Olympics and the 2016 Paralympic games. These articles were originally published in the Canadian Forces Journal, the Maple Leaf.

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