

## **Do You Want to Walk Faster?**

*[The following is from an article by Patti Finke (Team Oregon, USA), published in Walking New Zealand, issue 70]*

**How can I walk faster?** There are a couple of answers. The simplest one is to walk more. As you spend more time out there walking, you will get more efficient and more fit and, therefore, faster. The best answer is to walk more and to do some speed work and technique drills. Walking is a motor skill and requires practice of the skill for the body to improve. There is a point where speed is limited by technique, not by fitness level.

**How do you learn technique?** There are a number of books you can read and classes that you can take. But you must practise, practise, practice

**Arms:** Fast walking is accomplished by faster weight shift from one leg to the other. The arms play a major role in this activity. One easy way to get faster and more efficient is to learn the correct bent arm technique. First walk faster with a straight arm swing and notice how far forward and back your arms go. The hands comfortably pass behind the waist and often past the buttocks. They do not go up on the front. Then bend your arms at about 90 degrees (85-95) and repeat the activity. The hand should be at waist height, should not cross in the front and should not be much above chest height in the front. The most common arm use mistakes I see are side to side motion across the body (not working to help you move forward), and bringing the arms too high in front (which pushes you backward and creates lower back problems).

**Posture:** The correct fast walking posture is different from correct standing posture. It is more forward. Stand comfortably with your tummy tucked in and your weight over your heels. Then lean forward with both feet until you feel your heels are just about to lift. Your nose should be over your toes and your hips should be over the middle to front of your feet. The correct arm swing is aided by this posture. One posture mistake is leaning back with too high an arm swing. The other is what we call "groucho" posture or curvature of the back with straight arms. Both are bad for low backs. The head should be up, don't look at your feet.

**Stride length:** If your weight is in the proper place, the length of the walking stride is back behind in the push off and works to propel you forward. The foot is extended a short distance forward and the landing is on a straight knee. The knee should not be locked, but kept straight as it passes underneath your body. Faster paces are achieved by increasing turnover, not stride length. If you are reaching out in front of you with your foot, you are overstriding.

*'I would like to endorse fully the suggestions above. In February I competed successfully at the NZ Masters' Games. But at that time my stride was a full stretch, and my arms were straight and swung fully to the front and back. Two or three weeks later I attended a session at University of Waikato Sports Centre, where I was told that my style was all wrong, and that I was making at least the first four mistakes from the seven on the list which I was given (see next page). I set about correcting these, and my times immediately came down dramatically. And I would like to add one further thing which I have found that makes me go even faster: I drive my elbows back hard.'*

*Neal Utting*

## Common Walking Mistakes

Who taught you how to walk and how long ago did they teach you? Chances are, it was when you were a baby.

**Leaning forward:** As you walk forward there's a natural tendency to lean that way too. This can cause back pain and prevent you from achieving a good walking motion. Think tall and walk tall.

**Looking down:** Keep your head up; look forward with your chin level. This helps you keep good posture and lets you breathe well.

**Overstriding:** As you walk faster it's tempting to lengthen your stride. But this can become uncomfortable after a while and places more strain on your shins, knees and hips. Take smaller steps as you walk faster.

**Straight arms:** These act like long pendulums, slowing you down. Bend your arms at 90 degrees, keep them close to your body and swing in a smooth motion. This counter balances your leg motion and makes walking much smoother, especially at a faster pace.

**Chicken wings:** Flapping your arms from side to side in front of your body makes for an awkward walk. Your bent arms should swing back and forward, no higher than your chest, with an emphasis on the backward swing. You'll get more power into your walk with this arm motion.

**Slapping feet:** This happens when your shoes are too stiff or your shins are too weak to let your foot roll through the step. Get flexible shoes that bend. You can strengthen the muscles on your shins by walking on your heels for 30 seconds as part of your warm up.

**No push off:** Power is generated from each stride when you push off with your toes. Make a conscious effort to build a natural spring from the calf muscles.