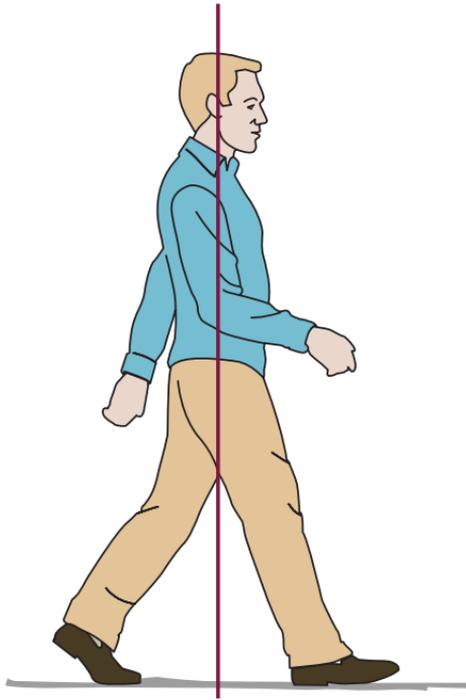


# Why Walking Is The Answer For You

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by Jonathan FitzGordon

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## Why Walking Is The Answer For You

1.5 billion people around the world suffer from chronic pain, making it the number one reason patients seek medical care. In fact, studies have shown that pain leads to more than 50 million lost workdays each year. The cost of pain, including medical bills and lost workdays, is estimated at \$100 billion per year world wide.

Back pain afflicts 31 million Americans at any given time<sup>1</sup> and 50% of all working Americans admit to having back pain symptoms each year<sup>2</sup>. We spend \$50 billion each year on lower back pain, and that only accounts for the more easily identifiable costs<sup>3</sup>. At a time when baby boomers are moving towards and past middle age we are seeing an ageing population ill equipped for the rigors of getting old. People are both living longer and moving less— a genuine recipe for disaster in our modern world.

Experts estimate that as many as 80% of the population will experience a back problem at some time in our lives<sup>4</sup> and amazingly lower back pain is the third most frequent reason for surgical procedure.<sup>5,6</sup> There are many options for pain relief—surgery, physical therapy, chiropractic, exercise, diet and more. The question is how many of them are effective and for how long? Most people are looking for an external fix

and many are available. But most of these fixes don't last because they are dealing with the obvious problem rather than the entire system.

Pain is associated with a wide range of injury and disease, and is sometimes the disease itself. Some conditions may have pain and associated symptoms arising from a discrete cause, such as postoperative pain or pain associated with a malignancy, or there may be conditions in which pain constitutes the primary problem, such as neuropathic pains or headaches.

The costs of unrelieved pain can result in longer hospital stays, increased rates of re-hospitalization, increased outpatient visits, and decreased ability to function fully leading to lost income and insurance coverage. As such, a patient's unrelieved chronic pain problems often result in an inability to work and maintain health insurance.

When asked about four common types of pain, respondents of a National Institute of Health Statistics survey indicated that low back pain was the most common (27%), followed by severe headache or migraine pain (15%), neck pain (15%) and facial ache or pain (4%).<sup>7</sup>

Back pain is the leading cause of disability in Americans under 45 years old. More than 26 million Americans between the ages of 20-64 experience

frequent back pain.<sup>7</sup>

Adults with low back pain are often in worse physical and mental health than people who do not have low back pain: 28% of adults with low back pain report limited activity due to a chronic condition, as compared to 10% of adults who do not have low back pain. Also, adults reporting low back pain were three times as likely to be in fair or poor health and more than four times as likely to experience serious psychological distress as people without low back pain.<sup>7</sup>

## **WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT THIS?**

The answer is pretty simple ...

Our posture and the way we walk reflects so much of our journey through life— from imitating those who you bonded with as a child, to bearing the compensatory scars of accidents and injuries both large and small, and the primal, sometimes crippling effect that fear, our most primal emotion, has on our muscles and bones. It is an exploration that is both physical and emotional as we confront the why of our movement pattern and physical traits. But there is danger on this path. To quote the German writer Goethe “Know myself? If I knew myself I’d run and hide.”

The body is designed to work and walk in a

specific pattern but it doesn't take much for it to lose its way. Even in utero events are conspiring against us; positioning in the womb, birth trauma, and our first breaths can affect our movement and posture long before we have control of our own destiny. Add to that the day-to-day reality of a life lived amongst others and machines, its aches pains and injuries all make finding ideal alignment difficult.

If your car gets a flat you are not going to go very far. The body doesn't work in the same way. For example, if the inside of the foot falls into disrepair the outside of the foot will begin to help and you will keep on walking. The problem with this is that the outside of the foot is then compromised in its original purpose, because it has now taken on two roles instead of one.

This is going on all over the body, but it doesn't need to be a bad thing. Think of yourself as a detective. Start to explore the way you walk and try to think about why things are moving the way they do. Does one arm seem to move more than the other while you are walking? In your best posture is one shoulder lower or higher than the other? Can you think of why this might be?

It is very easy to go through life accepting your posture as what it is. You can walk the way you walk and reach your dying day without much trouble. But you can also rebuild yourself in an image of your choice.

It starts with simple awareness. Begin to take note of where you ache. What moves where when you are walking? What seems right and what seems wrong? Most interestingly, begin to watch those close to you. You are your parents and siblings. Take note of the similarities and differences. Begin to watch strangers as well. Try to see how they walk and try to develop a sense of what seems right and wrong. Get to know yourself and the deeper meanings of the body will be revealed.

## **THREE RULES OF THUMB**

### **1. The Body Is A Machine**

Just like a car your body is designed to work in a specific fashion. Nothing in the body works in isolation—every part has an explicit function meant to work in harmony with other parts. Our skeleton is like the chassis of a car and the quality of our posture determines whether all of the moveable parts can work effectively. Many of the body's muscles though far away from each other are meant to work in synch and require proper posture to do so. Our body follows a mechanical model—it is a series of arches, hinges and pulleys, and learning about and understanding your body's mechanics will allow you to effectively utilize the genius behind the body's design.

## **2. Operating Instructions**

You have to learn how the body works in order to use it correctly. A question I am often asked is—Don't we just know how to walk? There are so many things we teach babies and young children— how to eat with a fork and spoon, how to tie your shoes and zip a jacket, but when it comes to walking, we all take our first step somewhere between ten and eighteen months old, get a big clap and a cheer from our parents and are then left to our own devices.

The fact is we are designed to walk in a specific way. Bones hold us up; muscles move us; nerves tell the muscles to move the bones. The foot is meant to fall very near to parallel with a distance of two or so inches between each foot. Our arms are meant to move in opposition to the legs with each step—when the left leg moves forward the right arm should move the same distance at the same pace. Our head is meant to be level so that the eyes can best communicate with the spine.

## **3. Batteries Not Included**

Strength and solidity serve us well. And for whatever the reason, some people are born strong. Look at your ancestry. Where did you come from? If your forefathers were from eastern European peasantry, like

mine, you likely have a reserve of strength stored away in your DNA. Our level of childhood activity goes a long way to determining the strength you carry into adulthood as well. An active child who played a lot of sports or just ran around a great deal will have a lot more core strength and body awareness than someone who spent more time indoors and avoided the playing field. There are many mitigating factors to movement as well, including illnesses, accidents, and traumas both physical and emotional.

Core Power is a very popular cultural buzz phrase. My approach to the core is about creating strength to support the muscles and bones of walking. Without the proper tone in the muscles of the pelvis and trunk, the body is not free to move effectively.

Our society's aesthetic focus is on the surface and the extremities. When most people go to the gym they work the muscles that people can see—they build strength in the arms legs and the surface of the belly. While tone in these muscle might look good, if it is pursued at the expense of the muscles responsible for holding us up and moving us we will run into trouble in the long run. The muscles of the inner thigh, the pelvic floor and deep low belly are the key core muscles for the CoreWalking Program. These three groups of muscles tend to be weak due to imbalances with their opposite more external counterparts.

## **WALKING CORRECTLY CAN CHANGE EVERYTHING**

Walking correctly is a full body experience. If we move well the front and the back of the body are equally broad and open, the legs are rooted to the ground as the head is lifting up to the sky, lengthening the skeleton and creating space in the joints. The side of the body is involved as well because the arms are free to move in all planes. The opposite arm and leg are always moving at the same time which creates a gentle rotation through the spine which moves energy endlessly up and down the body in a spiral. When we do this everything starts to flow much more easily.

To begin walking correctly Imagine that your bones stacked even on top of one another —your ears, shoulders, hips and ankles would all follow a straight line down the body. Instead for most of us our calves fall backward, our thighs sink forward, our lower back overarches, our upper back rounds back and our head juts forward. What the CoreWalking Program does is align your body with gravity, making it our ally instead of our nemesis. When we can find the whole body working together these imbalances begin to disappear.

There are many different techniques to employ when walking correctly. Let's look at a three-point plan you can use to begin to make your way into gravity's flow:

1. Imagine a string is pulling you up from the back of the neck. Extending the spine up towards the sky begins at the back of the body. The string pulling up should lengthen the back and soften the front relaxing the throat and softening the belly. Lengthening up should allow you to feel space between the bones.
2. Think of another string pulling you back from the base of the ribcage. Breath should engage the back of the body as much as the front; try to breathe into the middle back. Imagine that you are walking backwards as much as forwards, balancing all sides of the body.
3. Get your pelvis should be on top of the legs and keep them that way. We tend to let the legs rather than the trunk lead the way. When one leg is forward of the pelvis the other one should be an equal distance behind it.

## WHAT ABOUT MUSCLE STRENGTH?

At the CoreWalking Program, the core refers to three main muscle groups: The inner thighs, the pelvic floor and the abdominals. The psoas (our favorite muscle) is the main engine of walking and when it is properly toned and aligned it allows the body to move with the most efficiency and ease. Without balance and tone in our core the psoas won't be free to function at its best.

The inner thighs, known as the adductors (there are five of them), tend to be weaker than the outer thighs and in almost all cases need to be awakened to their proper role in walking.

The pelvic floor, muscularly known as the levator ani (three muscles), is called upon to serve a different role in modern man than in our predecessors. Our shift from quadruped to biped has not been an easy one. If you think about four-legged animals, the pelvis is the back wall of the body so the abdominal wall supports the internal organs. As a result of standing upright, our pelvic floor has become responsible for holding up our organs. This shift in responsibility is well deserved of our attention.

The belly is made up of four abdominal muscles all of which need balanced tone to function properly as they are essentially connected through assorted structures of the inner body (see fascia in the archive).

The average person will have much more tone in one or another of these muscles for different reasons. Classically we are way too developed in the most surface of these muscles, the rectus abdominis – otherwise known as the six-pack.

Proper tone and balanced function in these groups allows for the correct alignment of the legs, pelvis and lumbar spine, which creates the best environment for housing the internal organs and freeing the psoas to work at its best. Through a series of exercises tailored to each individual we can build an enduring strength to carry us through life.

### **ANOTHER REASON WHY WALKING IS RIGHT FOR YOU**

Here is why learning to walk is such a good idea: When Mary S. came to our studio with a chronic ankle injury that wouldn't go away even after repeated attempts with a physical therapist, endless chiropractic sessions and a host of different orthopedists who couldn't provide relief, she was skeptical that walking lessons could make a difference. It didn't take much convincing— after teaching her how to transfer weight successfully from the shin to the foot with a new walking pattern all of the good information and manipulation she had received from the above practitioners allowed

her to leave free of pain after just a few sessions.

Chiropractic, massage, physical therapy and the like all address injuries locally without necessarily working on intrinsic movement patterns. What is the point of fixing the shoulder if the injury to the shoulder is due to the way the shoulder and the spine relate to the pelvis? Rehabilitation needs to be holistic and the FitzGordon Method is here to change the way the entire body moves. Learning to walk involves getting the whole body to move as one interconnected unit.

Walking is the best way to bring permanent change to the body—because we all do it, and we do it over and over again. The human body will accept any pattern we put into it whether that pattern is good or bad. This is how chronic injuries develop out of seemingly innocent or even unknown events. The injury becomes chronic because your body adapts a new movement pattern due to unconscious compensations. Learning to walk, or re-learning to walk allows you to repattern your body to move in the direction of your choice.

Very few of us have consciously chosen the pattern with which we walk. It isn't hard to change that. The idea of the CoreWalking Program is that learning to walk correctly and then walking that way for a long enough period of time allows the body to adapt this new pattern, and you will have a new body primed to achieve optimal health.

## DON'T WE KNOW HOW TO WALK?

Some of us learned basic anatomy in school, but we didn't learn functional movements, nor did we practice them. Long gone are the department classes where you walked with a block on your head. When I tell people that we teach walking they respond with surprise – don't we know how to walk? Well, when you have a little baby you're going to teach her how to use a fork, you're going to teach him how to zip up his pants. The day they stand up to walk you simply say, "Yaaaay!" and then leave them to their own devices. Usually we learn our walking and other functional movements by imitation. We tend to imitate those we bond with, usually our parents – but also grandparents, babysitters, aunts and uncles. Our first movements are always about who was closest to us. So we essentially walk how our parents walk. I have seen instances of kids needing occupational therapy because their father is gimpy and the kid starts walking with that kind of limp.

This means that if you have a mother who has sciatica and you love your mother and walk like her, you're likely to have sciatica later in life. The flip side is if you are a mother with sciatica and you have a two-year-old daughter, you have incentive to not only get out of your pain but also spare your daughter a

lifetime of your unhealthy conditioned patterns that she is going to learn.

From our perspective, if you have good walking patterns and decent posture then everything is good. You're going to breathe well; you're going to have good blood flow; you're going to have good nervous energy; you're going to be happier about life. No joke. You'll probably love your dog more. Everything works when you have good posture and walking patterns. If you walk and stand well, you are going to minimize the wear and tear on the body. You'll minimize the likelihood of chronic injuries and the likelihood of poor conditioned patterns. You won't do as much compensating for injuries or imbalanced muscles. You'll be more fully evolved!

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