

# Half Marathon Walk Training - From First Time to Faster Times

For walkers, the Half Marathon can be so many things. It's long enough to be challenging, but doesn't take months to train for or recover from. A beginner can build to a half marathon in three or four months; a regular recreational walker could step up to the 21.1k challenge in two months; and anyone who regularly walks briskly for one hour could get ready in a month. Finishing a half marathon is a great goal, but once you've done a couple you'll inevitably think about going faster. Whether a first timer, second timer or 10-timer - this is for you.

If you've been walking for a while - say 30min a couple of times during the week and 45 or 60min at weekends - 12 weeks is enough to get you ready for your first half marathon. If you're more of a beginner, though, it's better to work through a series of goals.

## Getting Started

For beginners, the initial goal is to gradually build fitness. Start with 10-15min walks three times per week (e.g: Tues, Thurs, Sat). Add 5min every week and after four weeks you'll be handling 30min walks and be ready to think about a 12-week half marathon build up.

This stepping stone approach gives you a shorter-term focus, which keeps the main goal from looking too big. The gradual introduction will also help you avoid teething-type injuries.

Once you can handle 30min, you then need to consider the type of walking you need to not only finish a half marathon, but finish it in style.

## Endurance

It doesn't take a university degree to realise that the key to completing a half marathon is endurance. The ability to last the distance, regardless of speed, is everything. Endurance involves two basic elements:

- 1) *Aerobic endurance* - the ability for the heart to pump large volumes of blood to supply the working muscles with oxygen.
- 2) *Muscular endurance* - the ability for the legs to hold up for the distance.

The best way to achieve both these things is lots of regular non-stop walking on a consistent basis. Shorter workouts more often is always better than longer workouts less often. For example, you'll benefit more by training every second day than say five days in a row and then being forced to take three days off. If you walk competitively or want to improve your best half marathon time, you'll benefit more from say 10 hours of walking over five or six days than you would from 10 hours over four bigger days.

As well as consistency, the type of walking you do has a big bearing on building endurance. When starting out you shouldn't walk too fast or take on too many hills. If you do, you'll tire too quickly and be forced to stop or take breaks, which means you won't be building endurance.

If you want to go faster or be competitive then there is a place for faster workouts and hillier workouts, but only after you've built a solid base of fitness via consistent walking at easy to steady efforts. Without this base fitness you won't be able to handle enough fast or hilly walking to reap the benefits.

Another trick to building endurance is to vary the distance you walk. Instead of doing the same time or distance every time out, try going longer in one walk & shorter in the next. E.G: Instead of doing, say, 45 minutes every session, you'll get faster improvements by alternating walks of 60 minutes and 30 minutes.

This is the process of adaptation, where the longer walks continually push the boundaries of your endurance while the shorter walks allow you to recover for the next longer walk while maintaining fitness. Eventually, some of your longer days (once every week for most people) need to gradually increase to somewhere close to 21k or two hours. A beginner able to handle 16k will get through a half marathon comfortably if they pace themselves. But someone with goals around times or placings should be walking at least 20k once per week.

## Speed

Most people end up completing their first half marathon at around their normal training pace. But if you are comfortably walking 16-20k in training, then you might like to explore your potential a little. If so, then you'll need to do some faster and higher intensity training. For walkers wanting to improve performance, the need for speed is three-fold:

- 1) To build biomechanical efficiency at speed.
- 2) To build a higher level of oxygen uptake.
- 3) To develop the endurance to hold higher speeds/efforts for longer.

The need to build higher oxygen uptake is obvious. Walking is an essentially aerobic affair (body can meet its energy requirements via oxygen uptake). If you can improve oxygen uptake, you will be able to walk faster for longer. What we're talking about here is increasing your bodies maximum ability to

absorb and utilise oxygen. We do this by doing some of our walking at a faster but still aerobic effort.

Faster work can take a few different shapes for different reasons. Doing longish sessions at your goal race pace conditions the body to handle that effort for longer periods, and helps you establish what your race pace is. Faster sessions for shorter periods increase oxygen uptake and efficiency, which helps you handle race pace more efficiently. For anyone wanting to improve their half marathon times, building in one of two faster workouts is a must.

### **Impact Can Be Good**

To maximize the specificity of your training you need to do a certain amount of training on the actual surface the race will be held on - i.e: the road. Roads gets a bad rap as the fast way to injury. But walkers don't face the same impact risk than runners do, so well-planned regular road sessions are safe and will condition your body to handle the stresses of a road surface come race day.

The best way to avoid injuries associated with training on hard surfaces is to start by doing your longer walks on soft surfaces & shorter walks on roads, then as you get fitter swap to do your longer and faster stuff on roads and the shorter, easier sessions on softer surfaces.

### **Rest Is Even Better**

Most people think that endurance training is all about mileage. It's not! The key is actually rest! And get this: while you do need to train, you actually get stronger when you're not training!

The reasoning here relates to the very essence of the human body. We're extremely adaptive organisms that can adapt to handle almost any stress. If you catch a cold you get ill, the body eventually builds immunity. Likewise, if you

regularly partake in reasonable amounts of training (a stress) the body will become better at handling it... BUT... the body doesn't adapt while you're stressing it. It adapts only when you allow it to rest.

**Formula:** *Stress + Rest = Adaptation.*

In the case of sport, adaptation means improvement. And not merely in your immediate performance, but also your ability to handle more stress. So, in the long term you'll find yourself able to handle more training, which means you force more adaptation, which means you continue getting faster and stronger. The key is working out how much stress you can handle before you are forced to rest.

To train for the half marathon you need to stress the body with longer relaxed walks, then allow it to recover with shorter easier days or even a day off. A good training program will force adaptation to other essential elements by alternating hillier days with flatter days, faster days with slower days, road days with off-road days.

Once the training is in place you also need to think about recovering for the big race. In the last week or two you need to let your body recover from the training so the adaptation is complete by race day. This means gradually reducing the amount of training you are doing, but maintaining the frequency so that you maintain fitness.

You can also extend this recovery principle into your lifestyle by scheduling your easiest workouts or days off to coincide with high stress days at work or home, like Mondays and Fridays. Likewise, after achieving your half marathon goal you should allow a week or two of rest and easier walks to allow the body to recover.

### **Training Schedules**

The half marathon is a wonderfully achievable challenge for beginners, a worthy challenge for people looking to improve their times, and of course, a great stepping stone to the full marathon.

The following schedules are good starting points from which to tailor your own half marathon training.

**The First Timer's Schedule...** is for a first-time half marathoner who has already been walking for at least a month and might even have done a 5k or 10k event. This means most beginners needs approx. four months for their goal of completing a half marathon.

**The Getting Faster Schedule...** is for walkers who have completed one or two half marathons and want to go a bit faster. Or maybe you just want get a bit fitter to enjoy your walking more. It is intended as a logical step up from having completed the beginners schedule at least once. It will also set you up very well to progress to a full marathon walk further down the line.

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## Half Marathon Walk - For First Timers

4 U	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10	Week 11	Week 12
MON	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off
TUES	40min <i>easy, flat</i>	50min <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	40min <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	70min <i>steady, flat</i>	80min <i>flat</i> inc 6k <i>Goal Pace</i>	45min <i>easy, flat</i>	8k <i>Goal Pace</i>	10k <i>Goal Pace</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	45min <i>easy</i>
WED	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off	Day Off
THUR	40min <i>easy, flat</i>	50min <i>easy, hilly</i>	1hr <i>easy, hilly</i>	40min <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>easy, hilly</i>	70min <i>easy, hilly</i>	80min <i>easy, hilly</i>	45min <i>easy, hilly</i>	80min <i>easy, hilly</i>	1.5hrs <i>easy, hilly</i>	1.5hrs <i>easy, flat</i>	30min <i>easy</i>
FRI	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off	Day Off
SAT	30min <i>easy, flat</i>	35min <i>easy, flat</i>	40min <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>Easy, flat</i>	40min <i>easy, flat</i>	50min <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	14k <i>very easy</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	4k <i>Flat</i> <i>Goal Pace</i>	15min <i>easy</i>
SUN	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	30min <i>easy, flat</i>	8k <i>easy, hilly</i>	10k <i>easy, flat</i>	12k <i>easy, hilly</i>	30min <i>goal pace</i>	16k <i>easy, hilly</i>	16k <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	<b>YOUR 21.1k GOAL</b>

<i>Establishing consistency. Introducing longer walks.</i>	Recovery Week	<i>Gradually increasing volume. Introducing strength work.</i>	Recovery Week	<i>Peak volume &amp; strength. Introducing race pace.</i>	Gradually tapering volume to freshen for race.
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**Hints** Easy = comfortable effort / Steady = firm effort / Goal Pace = pace per kilometre for Half Marathon goal time / Intervals = alternating 5min fast with 5min steady.  
 Flat = flat or rolling terrain / Hilly = terrain with several uphill of 2-5min / Legspeed = 30sec sprint-walks on flat terrain, with 5min easy between each sprint-walk.  
 Days Off - recovery days to absorb the training, but could also be used for “easy” non-impact training such as swimming, gym, palates, cycling etc.

## Half Marathon Walk - For Faster Times

4 U	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Week 9	Week 10	Week 11	Week 12
MON	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off	Day Off
TUES	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>steady, flat</i>	45min <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>easy, hilly</i>	75min <i>Flat Inc 6k Goal Pace</i>	1.5hrs <i>Flat Inc 8k Goal Pace</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	1.5hrs <i>Flat Inc 6x Intervals</i>	1.5hrs <i>Flat Inc 6x Intervals</i>	1hr <i>Flat Inc 4x Intervals</i>	50min <i>easy, flat</i>
WED	30min <i>easy, flat</i>	35min <i>easy, flat</i>	40min <i>easy, flat</i>	Day Off	45min <i>easy, flat</i>	50min <i>easy, flat</i>	55min <i>easy, flat</i>	Day Off	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	Day Off or X-Training	40min <i>Flat inc 3k Goal Pace</i>
THUR	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	70min <i>easy, hilly</i>	80min <i>easy, hilly</i>	45min <i>easy, hilly</i>	80min <i>steady, flat</i>	1.5hrs <i>steady, hilly</i>	1.5hrs <i>steady, hilly</i>	1hr <i>Inc 4k Goal Pace</i>	1.5hrs <i>Flat Inc 10k Goal Pace</i>	1.5hrs <i>Flat Inc 10k Goal Pace</i>	1hr <i>inc legspeed x10</i>	30min <i>easy, flat</i>
FRI	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off or X-Training	Day Off	Day Off
SAT	40min <i>easy, flat</i>	50min <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>inc legspeed x6</i>	1hr <i>inc legspeed x8</i>	1hr <i>inc legspeed x10</i>	1hr <i>flat Goal Pace</i>	1hr <i>inc legspeed x10</i>	1hr <i>inc legspeed x10</i>	4k <i>Flat Goal Pace</i>	15min <i>easy</i>
SUN	10k <i>easy, flat</i>	12k <i>easy, flat</i>	14k <i>easy, hilly</i>	30min <i>goal pace</i>	16k <i>easy, hilly</i>	18k <i>easy, flat</i>	20k <i>easy, hilly</i>	30min <i>easy, flat</i>	20k <i>easy, hilly</i>	20k <i>easy, flat</i>	1hr <i>easy, flat</i>	<b>YOUR 21.1k GOAL</b>

**Hints**

Establish consistency.  
Introduce longer walks & strength.
Recovery  
Week
Gradually increasing volume & strength.  
Introduce higher intensities.
Recovery  
Week
Peak training.
Gradually tapering  
volume to freshen for race

Easy = comfortable effort / Steady = firm effort / Goal Pace = pace per kilometre for Half Marathon goal time / Intervals = alternating 5min fast with 5min steady.  
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