



THE ART OF WALKING



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The Alexander Technique of Walking

Long distance walking can be physically challenging. To maximise efficiency and minimise injuries, it is wise to re-learn good walking habits. This document describes the Alexander Technique of walking.

The Art of Walking and the Alexander Technique

We generally don't think about our walking style. As toddlers, we learned and imitated those around us. We took on their postures and gait styles. Our environment, activities and footwear also influenced our gait. Everything is generally fine until we head out on the trail. Repetitive strain injuries creep up and we are hobbled by shin splints (pain at the front of the shin), plantar fasciitis (tendonitis of the foot) or chondromalacia patella (pain and uneven wearing of the knee cap).

When considering long distance walking, it is wise to review good practices on walking. The aim is to be efficient in your movements and minimise muscle strains and injuries.

In some walking patterns, the heel leads the gait. The forward swinging leg extends far in front; the heel strike is vigorous, leading to the heel absorbing much of the impact of the body. Emphasis on the heel strike causes the small shin muscle (Tibialis Anterior) to overwork in lifting and extending the foot. This may lead to shin splints. The higher impact of this gait can also lead to painful knee joints.

Other walking patterns involve emphasis on the toe stance and over use of calf muscles (Gastrocnemius and Soleus). Walking with the heels held higher than the fore foot. This is common during up-hill walking and in some running styles. This will cause the calf muscles to shorten. The strength and length imbalance created between the calves and the shin muscles can cause shin splints and also lead to plantar fasciitis.

Muscle imbalances in the Quadriceps muscles (especially Vastus Medialis and Vastus Lateralis) can cause poor knee cap (patella) tracking and lead to deep knee pain when walking up or down hilly terrain. This will lead to chondromalacia patella.

These walking injuries will prevent you from achieving your walking goals. We suggest that you become mindful of your own walking style and alter it to minimise possible chronic overuse injuries. The following is a natural walking style based on the Alexander Technique. Try using it while performing your walking workouts. Try it first on city walks where the terrain is smooth. It will help you focus on technique more than the terrain. Later, try it on wilderness trails as well. It will become second nature soon enough.

The Alexander Technique is an educational process that uses verbal and tactile feedback to teach improved use of the individual's body by identifying and changing inefficient habits that cause stress, fatigue and pain. If you find it difficult to do this on your own, try it with a friend/observer, or take a few coaching lessons from a qualified Alexander Technique practitioner.

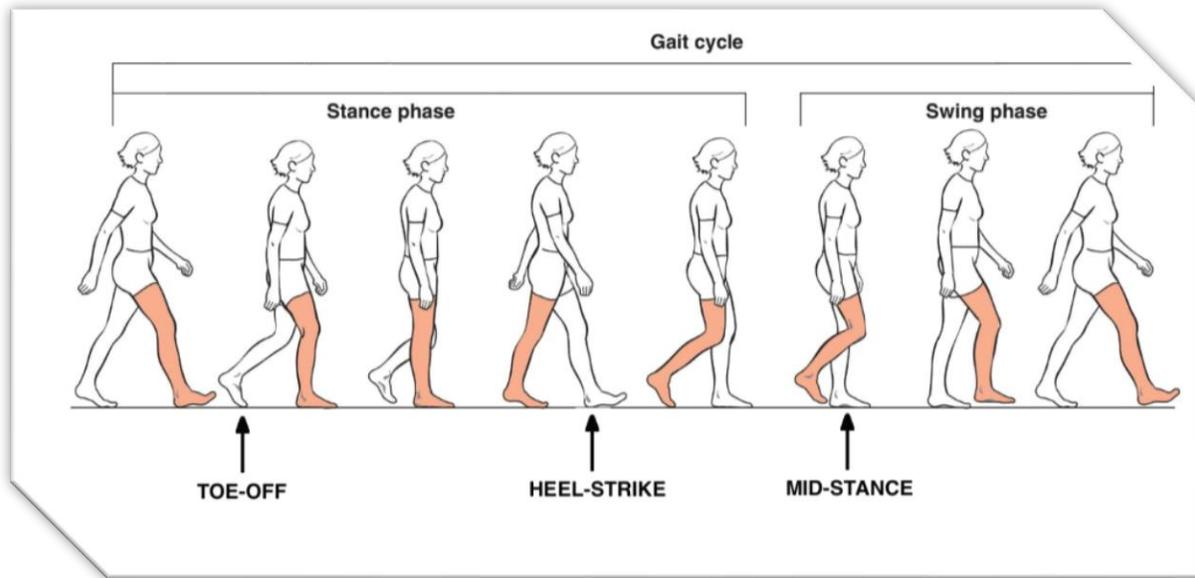


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The Head Leads - The Stance Phase

The fundamental tenet of the Alexander Technique is that the head leads a lengthening spine which leads the body into integrated movement. Feel your head gently leading your body up towards the ceiling. Just this frequently reduces the effort of standing. Feel your feet evenly on the ground, sense both feet wholly on the floor with an even weight distribution from the front to the back of both feet.

While you walk, keep returning to the head - asking that it continue to lead the spine into lengthening. Then focus on your knees. They need to be slightly released. Locking the knees tightens the thighs and kicks the whole body out of alignment, usually creating a sway in the lower back.

Then pay attention to the muscles of the lower back, right at the top of the buttocks. Relax those muscles and do not tighten the buttocks. This creates a readiness for movement in the body rather than standing rigidly upright.

The Shoulder Girdle

The shoulder girdle is designed to float easily on top of the rib cage with the arms hanging freely to the sides. Simply let your breathing move the ribs gently on the sides and back as well as the front. This is the basis of gentle, balanced movement in the torso and allows breathing to act as an inner massage of the muscles of the back and shoulder girdle. Proper fitting of your back-pack will allow you to maintain a relaxed torso. Your pack can even help you in keeping your spine lifting upward and forward.

From the Calves - The Toe Off

Most of us think walking comes mainly from the front of the thighs (Quadriceps) - which lift the legs as we walk - but the initial movement in walking starts behind the leg. The calf lifts the heel off the ground, which places the foot on the ball of the big toe, as the leg bends easily at the knee and hip joint.

At this moment, experiencing your weight on the ball of one foot and the other foot fully planted, in Mid-Stance, you don't have to shift sideways onto the supporting leg for balance. You can allow the leg on the ball of the foot to push off and swing forward. The calves take the heels off the ground, allowing the foot room to swing through.

From the Knees - The Swing Phase

Once the leg swings forward, gently bend the knee just enough to swing the leg without catching the toes on the ground. The foot should remain relaxed and neutral. Try shortening your stride and gently placing your foot down directly below your nose.

All Together

In integrated walking, the head floats up gently. The body flows under the head in alignment with all of the bones stacked above each other. The knees bend easily (as if on a bicycle), and the torso is supported (as if you are on a bicycle seat) and the torso releases up in an upward and forward direction instead of lumbering side to side. The foot strike starts with a gentle heel strike followed by rolling toward the toes. The arms swing freely at the sides.

It's a remarkable experience to walk in this way, feeling as if the body is suspended under the head and the feet lightly making contact with the earth. With this decreased impact, fatigue is minimised. As the terrain changes, your stride will adapt, shorter strides for uphill walking and moderate strides for flat or downhill terrain. Keep your toes under your nose as a general guideline for stride length.

Keep at it and soon you will find this natural walking style becoming easier. If you start experiencing some pain from walking review your gait and adjust it to maximise efficiency and minimise impact.

References:

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