



What is Nordic Walking?

Nordic Walking can be thought of in two ways: either as walking with poles or cross-country skiing without the skis. A lot of people walk with poles or sticks when rambling or hiking, where relatively sturdy folding poles are used to support the weight. However in Nordic Walking both the technique and poles are different.

In Nordic Walking, lightweight poles are used to produce a forward push during the walking stride. The active arm, shoulder and upper-body movements involved mean that Nordic Walking exercises a much higher proportion of the muscles in the body than walking or running. The use of the upper body muscles, combined with the increased speed of walking that occurs naturally as a result of using the arms to assist, means that Nordic Walking burns between 20 and 46% more calories than ordinary walking, but without feeling much more strenuous.

Why haven't I heard about it before?

Originating in Finland, Nordic Walking has actually been around for over 70 years. Originally it was used as summer training for cross-country skiers. However during the 1980's and 1990's the potential for improving health and fitness in the wider population was realised and it was developed as a recreational sport. It has become very popular in Finland, with one in 5 people regularly taking part in Nordic Walking. It is becoming very popular in Britain and Europe too, with increasing participation among all ages, and levels of fitness. It has arrived in Britain relatively recently, so you may not have heard of it until now.

So why is Nordic Walking so good?

The majority of people in the UK need to take more exercise, and/or to lose weight. Nordic Walking is a simple and effective form of exercise that can help with this. It needs relatively simple and inexpensive equipment, you don't need to find time to go to the gym and can be done from your doorstep. Nordic Walking has been shown to burn more calories than ordinary walking at the same pace, and even more calories because you tend to walk faster – up to 46% more calories over the same time as ordinary walking. Nordic Walking can burn similar amounts of calories as running, swimming or aerobics classes, but without the effort being so noticeable.

There are other benefits too – the use of the upper body and particularly the upper back and shoulders provides benefit for people with back and neck conditions and works the muscles that are often tensed up when you are sitting at a desk or computer. Also, the use of the arms to partially support the body weight make it more acceptable to people with knee or leg problems. Because the intensity can be varied to suit the fitness of the participant, it can be very useful for cross-training in athletes. As a low impact activity, it can be very helpful for people coming back from injury, or to reduce risk of injury during training.

It is also fun – an excuse to get out, enjoy the outdoors, and meet other people. Mixed ability groups can be easily accommodated by varying the technique used by individuals.

What if I've had medical problems in the past?

Nordic Walking has been shown to be beneficial and safe in people with arterial disease, with joint problems, and older people. It has also been shown to be beneficial and safe in overweight people. However your instructor will ask you to fill in a form to see if you suffer from medical conditions that may be made worse by taking exercise. If you do suffer from medical problems, it is important to check with your doctor to ensure it is safe for you to start taking exercise.

Why do I need lessons to learn to walk?

It sounds odd, but it is important to have lessons when you are starting out. This is because most people who pick up Nordic Walking poles and just have a go would not be using them correctly. This means they are missing out on a lot of the benefits of Nordic Walking. Learning to do it properly right from the start means you can get the best benefit out of the time you spend taking exercise.

How many lessons?

This varies with your fitness, age, sports experience, and how quickly you pick up new skills. People who have done cross country skiing will tend to pick it up quickly. However most people can pick it up after 1 to 6 hours of tuition, returning occasionally to learn new ways to progress technique and to enjoy the company of people who, like them, enjoy Nordic Walking.

Do I need special poles?

Nordic Walking poles are different from trekking poles and if you have walking or trekking poles, they will not be suitable for Nordic Walking. However you don't need to buy Nordic Walking poles before your lessons – your instructor will provide top quality Exel poles for you while you learn.

Trekking poles are designed for support, and tend to be sturdy, heavy and foldable. Trekking poles are placed in front of you as you walk.

Nordic Walking technique is different and relies on having very light and flexible poles that can absorb vibration and that have a specially designed strap to assist the forward push. They are also extremely strong. Correct technique cannot be developed using heavy trekking poles with simple straps, and they tend not to absorb vibration well due to the joints. Consequently you need to use special one-piece Nordic Walking poles. Your instructor can help you choose the right size. Exel poles have been developed specifically for Nordic Walking. Exel pioneered the development of these poles, and most of their pole range are guaranteed for life.

Some discount stores offer cheaper Nordic-style poles, but their strength is not guaranteed, and the spike and asphalt paw are not as robust as a more expensive pole. Some components cannot be replaced. Their purchase may turn out to be a false economy.

Do I need special clothing?

Nordic Walking is attractive because you need little equipment. It is an outdoor activity, so you will need to be prepared for changes in weather. It is best to wear a number of thin layers, rather than one or two thick layers. A base layer

(such as a t-shirt or football shirt, preferably not cotton), mid-layer or layers (such as a jumper or light fleece), and a jacket should allow you to change your clothing to suit conditions. Comfortable stretchy trousers, shorts, or leggings are suitable, but skirts are not recommended. On your feet, walking shoes, or trainers, particularly if they are well-cushioned and water-resistant, are very suitable. Walking boots are not recommended unless the weather is very inclement, because they restrict ankle movement. Shoes should have a good grippy sole to prevent slipping on wet grass. Gloves can be used in colder weather. A hat or baseball cap is useful to protect from sun or rain, and remember to use sunscreen. Some manufacturers produce clothing specifically designed for Nordic Walking, but it is not essential to have this clothing to enjoy the sport.

Where can I do Nordic Walking?

Nordic walking can be done almost anywhere. You don't need mountains or countryside – it can be done in parks, on tarmac footpaths, on canal towpaths, or on public footpaths and bridleways – anywhere you can do normal walking.

Are there any competitions?

At present, Nordic Walking is not a competitive sport. However, the 2007 Lakeland Trails Challenges have a Nordic Walking section, and some half-marathons and 10k runs have also had Nordic Walking sections, to allow a wider range of people with a wider range of fitness levels to participate. This side of the sport is likely to develop in future, but Nordic Walking will always remain an ideal activity for people who don't want to take part in races.

How can I learn?

Nordic Walking UK has over 350 trained instructors in the UK, all trained to the standards of the International Nordic Walking Association. These instructors have been thoroughly assessed to ensure they have good personal technique as well as good teaching skills. Nordic Walking UK instructor courses are recognised by the Register for Exercise Professionals (REPS).

You can find details of all Nordic Walking UK instructors on the Nordic Walking UK web site at <http://www.nordicwalking.co.uk>. You should be able to find an instructor who offers classes or one-to-one instruction near to where you live.

If you live in Tamworth, or the surrounding area, your local instructor is Sarah Walters. You can contact her on 01827 286267 or by e-mail on sarah@pragmasis.com. Further information on local classes, introductory sessions and demonstrations, please see www.pragmasis.com/fitness



Sarah Walters, INWA Nordic Walking Instructor for tuition in Tamworth and surrounding area

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Contact me, and I'll try and help you!