

# Retro-Exercise

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## *Moving forward may not always be the best choice*

It's the New Year, and just like last year you've make a resolution to shed that extra tonnage and get back in shape. Incidentally, gyms and fitness centers love the month of January—it's when they experience their biggest growth in membership. People sign up with a firm resolve to get in shape and go to the gym several times per week. But after the first few weeks, or at most, a couple of months, the same people that spent hundreds of dollars to join never step foot in the place again. Easy money; I know, I'm a personal trainer.

One of the reasons that people abandon their fitness programs is boredom. They've been doing the same exercises year after year, and unless they get a workout partner, personal trainer or add a new dimension to their routine, they quickly become apathetic and view their time spent exercising as a



The Author, John Wills

waste. Let me make a suggestion—try **exercising backwards**.

Sound crazy? Bear with me... One of the biggest complaints that I hear from both runners and walkers alike is that they get bored easily. They traverse the same course, see the same scenery and people, and before they know it they're no longer enjoying the activity. What about doing the same thing, only doing it in reverse? It brings a whole different perspective to a formerly mundane pursuit.

No matter if you are a walker or a runner, either indoors or out, whether on the road or on a treadmill, moving backwards is quite beneficial. Remember sitting backward in your parents' station wagon years ago? It was interesting watching where you'd been, rather than where you headed. The same principle applies to walking/running backwards. But besides seeing things differently, there are many more advantages to adding this routine to your workouts.

**Improved balance:** moving backwards is a challenge; the body and its muscle groups are unaccustomed to this type of movement, therefore it takes more muscles to maintain an upright posture.

**Injury rehab:** shin splints, groin injuries, ankle sprains, Achilles problems and knee problems, even if you've had surgery, all benefit from retro-exercise. Since the angle of motion that the knee follows when moving backwards is less than when moving ahead, it's also gentler on the knees. This movement

will strengthen the hamstrings as well, which are always underdeveloped in runners. There is also less impact on landing when walking/running backwards, since the toes strike the ground before the heels.

**Cardio increase:** walking backward for 100 steps is roughly equivalent to walking forward for 1000 steps. Running backward at a rate of six miles per hour uses a third more calories per minute than running forward. So why is that important? It allows you to use your exercise time more efficiently by spending less time on the treadmill or track. Your heart rate is increased as well.

**Core workout:** since your back and abs have now switched places, it forces you to contract your abdominals giving them a workout while your back gets a much needed break. You will find that your posture may improve as well, since you will not be leaning forward as you do while running.

**Improved peripheral vision and hearing:** we don't have eyes in the back of our heads (even though you would swear that your mother did) therefore the senses compensate when we're moving in reverse.

Have I hooked you yet? If so, let's get started with a word of caution. Until you've tried this new exercise and are comfortable doing it, confine yourself to a treadmill or a track—someplace where you know the footing is sure and unencumbered by potholes, cracks and bumps. If you choose a treadmill, try this: set the speed at 1 – 3 mph until you get the hang of the motion. It's important that you do not use the handrails. By doing that you've totally defeated the entire purpose of the exercise. Walking backwards forces your postural muscles to compensate for balance. Your hips, legs and the muscles that control your ankles will be stressed as well—even at one mile per hour.

Once you're comfortable at a slower speed, increase the speed (check your posture—do not slouch forward). You will instantly feel muscles working that were not utilized during forward walking/running. If you are involved in cardio classes, e.g., step classes, or even sports like basketball or football, you will see improvement in your performance. To challenge yourself even more, hit the incline button to 2.0, feel the burn in your quads.

Outdoors you can mimic the same treadmill routine. Start out slowly on a track or running path that you know has a smooth surface. Once you get comfortable with moving backward, increase the pace. On both the treadmill and outdoors, try to build up to a 30 minute workout. You can alternate walking/running forward for that half hour (count steps or use minute increments). Continue to switch back and forth until you can remain backward for 20 – 30 minutes. Try to include this new exercise into your regime once or twice per week. You should notice a difference quickly, and you will find that you are not looking at your watch waiting for the end of your workout.

The New Year is a time to look for new things, to include a new you. Try looking at things from a different perspective in 2009—backwards.

Stay safe brothers and sisters!