

fit tip

By Barb Gormley

Nordic walking

Propel yourself to good fitness levels!

DAN OVERMYER HAS ALWAYS been a keen exerciser with a passion for all types of sports and activities. Over the years, he's enjoyed swimming at a local pool, walking on his treadmill, pedalling his stationary bike and meeting friends at a local fitness club for weight training. But when he discovered he had type 2 diabetes 14 years ago, he realized it was time to start exercising more regularly and more seriously. Today, he easily manages his disease by working out every day, watching his diet and taking an oral medication.

Last year, a friend introduced him to Nordic walking: an exercise trend recently arrived from Europe. When Overmyer discovered what a dramatic effect it had on his blood glucose levels – and how much fun it was – he quickly became a huge fan.

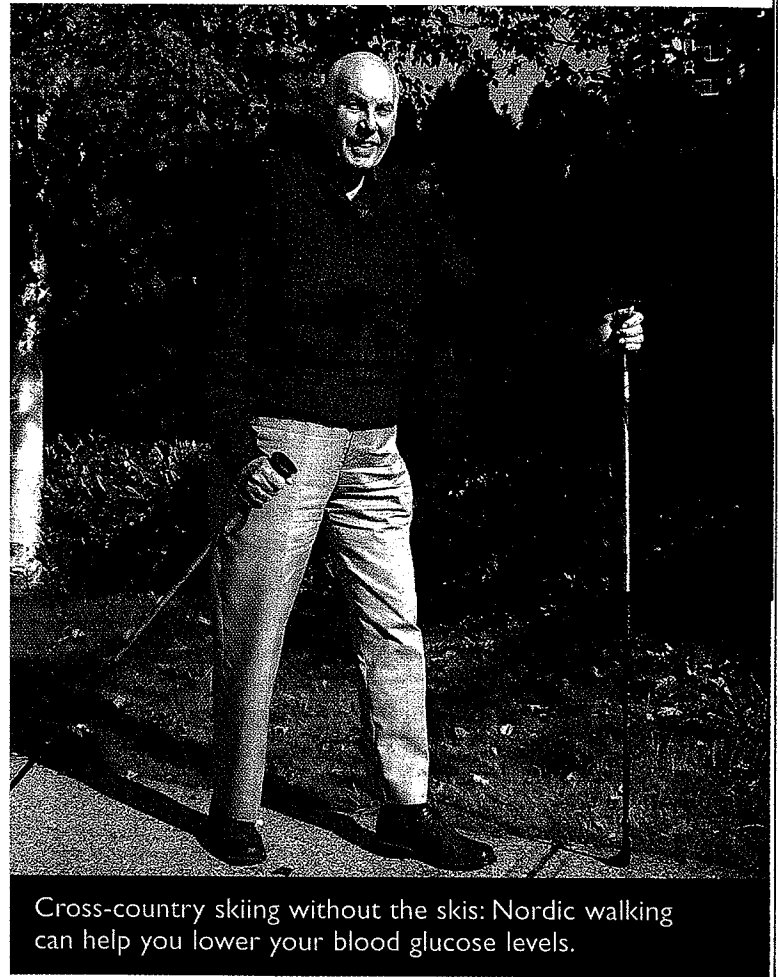
Nordic walking involves walking with two high-tech telescoping poles – think cross-country skiing without the skis – and turns walking from a lower-body workout to full-body exercise.

“An hour of vigorous pole walking keeps my blood glucose down for a whole day and as well as or better than an hour-long workout at my fitness centre,” says the retired University of British Columbia professor enthusiastically. It's also more effective than regular walking, he finds. “After a Nordic walk, my blood glucose level is always very good the next day, usually 6.2,” he explains. “One day I did an experiment and walked the same distance and time without the poles. The next day my level was 7.”

Research supports Overmyer's experience. Studies show that when it comes to lowering blood glucose, people who practise both aerobic exercise and resistance training see better results than those who do just one, says diabetes educator Lee-Anne Kennedy of Deep River, Ont.

“Propelling yourself forward with the poles as you walk gives you the aerobic benefits of regular walking, but at the same time gives you a resistance training workout for the muscles in the arms, shoulders and core area,” says Kennedy, who runs, Nordic walks and skis several times a week to help control her type 2 diabetes.

And there's good news for people who are interested in weight loss, adds Kennedy: “Because Nordic walking involves more muscles than regular walking, it burns substantially more calories.”



Cross-country skiing without the skis: Nordic walking can help you lower your blood glucose levels.

The Canadian Diabetes Association's 2003 *Clinical Practice Guidelines* recommend that individuals with type 2 diabetes aim for 50 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise (such as walking, swimming or cycling) three days a week. They also recommend resistance exercise (such as wall push-ups, lifting soup cans or propelling yourself with Nordic walking poles) three times per week.

The reasonable price (about \$100) and convenience are other big selling features for this activity, according to Mandy Shintani, the owner of Urban Poling, a Vancouver company that sells walking poles and certifies instructors. “People love Nordic walking because you can just step out the door with your poles. You don't have to drive to a club or even change your clothes.”

PHOTO: URBAN POLING

The technique

TO LEARN HOW TO USE YOUR POLES effectively, Shintani suggests following the instructions that come with your poles, attending a Nordic walking demonstration or joining an organized Nordic walking group in your area. (Call 1-877-499-7999 or visit www.urbanpoling.com for information.)

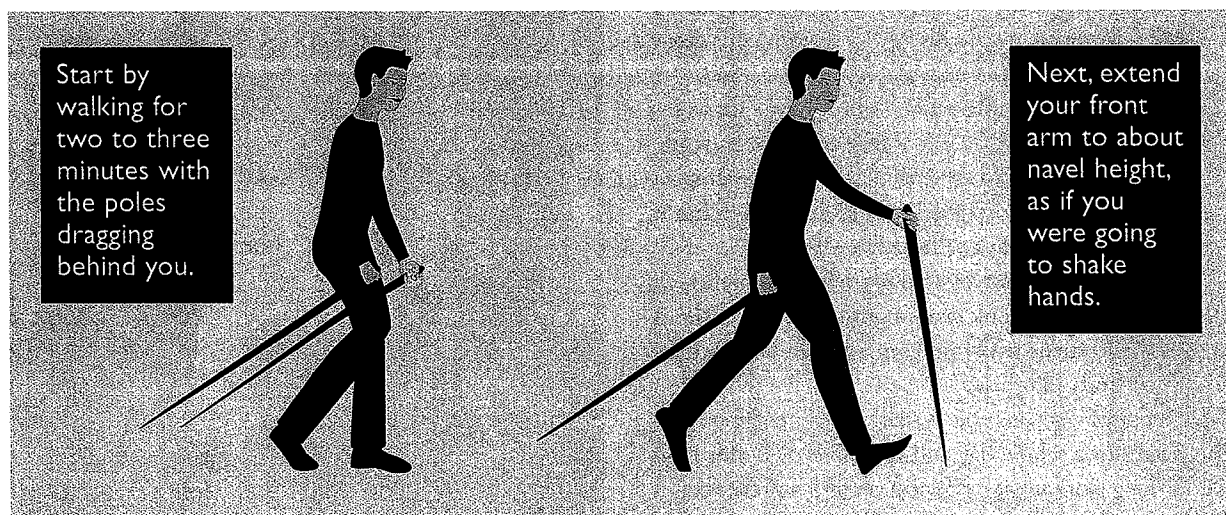
Most people will start developing good form after as little as 30 minutes of practice. Follow these steps to get moving:

First, adjust the telescoping poles so they are the correct length for your height. Then, start by walking for two to three minutes with the poles dragging behind you. Keeping your arms straight lets them swing natu-

rally. Notice that your right arm swings forward as your left foot steps forward. Keep the tips of the poles well behind you at about a 45-degree angle to your body.

Next, make the swinging arm movement more pronounced by extending your front arm to about navel height, as if you were going to shake hands with someone; the elbow should be straight. You'll find that, without any effort, the tips of the poles dig into the ground at the top of each arm swing.

Finally, press your little finger and outside edge of your hand down onto the base of the handle each time you plant the poles. Avoid gripping the handle too tightly. Feel the back of your arm, shoulder and abdominals tighten up each time you press down.



Five fast facts about Nordic walking

1 Poles are a hit in Europe. Nordic walking originated with Scandinavian skiers who wanted to stay fit during the warm months. In Finland today, approximately 28 per cent of older adults and baby boomers Nordic walk once a week. In Germany, 4.4 million people use walking poles. According to Mandy Shintani, owner of Urban Poling in Vancouver, "people tell me that if you're walking in Germany without poles, you stand out in the crowd and people wonder why you're not using them!"

2 It's easy on the joints and burns mega-calories. Using poles reduces stress to the joints of the lower body, so it's appealing to people with arthritic or problem joints. Nordic walking burns up to 46 per cent more calories than normal walking, according to research from the Cooper Institute in Texas.

3 It's ideal for all fitness levels. Beginners and advanced walkers alike can enjoy the aerobic and upper-body muscle toning benefits of poles. The intensity of the workout increases as you walk faster and press down harder on the base of the handle.

4 Walking poles help your balance. If you have trouble with balance, poles can give you more confidence while walking outdoors. Urban Poling sells a walking pole with a larger bell-shaped tip specifically designed for people with significant balance issues.

5 Ski poles can't be substituted. When the metal tips on ski poles hit the pavement, they create vibrations that travel up your arms; this can cause elbow and shoulder injuries. The rubber tips and ergonomic handles on walking poles absorb vibrations.