

The success and rapid growth of Nordic walking is based purely on its simplicity and effectiveness and not the latest equipment or trend. Few other exercise sessions appeal to so many markets, can be taken to the consumer and can deliver impressive results in such a short space of time. Based on a sports coaching technique for cross country skiers and now adapted to be delivered at any level, anywhere, it is increasingly being used by personal trainers, PCTs, local authorities and health clubs who are looking to engage with those who do not respond to traditional 'exercise' sessions.

Public demand for Nordic walking has surged in 2009 following recent exposure on the BBC and national newspapers. It has attracted successful partnerships with Weightwatchers, ASDA, Debenhams, Diabetes UK and Age Concern and a future fund raising event in conjunction with the British Heart Foundation.

### More than just walking with poles

To understand the rise in uptake of Nordic walking it is important to appreciate that it is not just walking with poles but is a structured, progressive exercise concept that can be (and needs to be) tailored to each individual taking into account their preferred learning strategies, skill acquisition abilities and ultimately their spoken and subconscious goals. Nordic walking is almost unique in that these factors can be considered and implemented on an individual basis within a group setting. This becomes personal training made affordable with

“Nordic walking is a lower intensity option to running and so attracts those looking for health gains or weight loss”



# Why nordic walking is unlikely to be just another fad

Martin Christie of Nordic Walking UK explores why Nordic Walking is set to become as popular in the UK as it is in mainland Europe.

the added benefit of group dynamics.

Nordic walking is physically and psychologically acceptable to an extremely wide range of the population. Nordic Walking UK has helped over 40 Local Authorities and a number of outdoor activity centres to encourage physical activity for all levels.

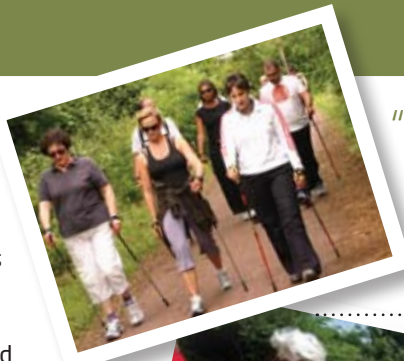
### Total body workout

Nordic walking is a lower intensity option to running and so attracts those looking for health gains or weight loss (the average client age is 30-60 years). With involvement of up to 90% of skeletal muscles in Nordic walking propulsion, numerous studies indicate elevated oxygen consumption and calorific expenditure over ordinary walking when using poles. Church et al. (2002) reported an 18% increase in

energy expenditure in women, and 21% increase in men, when Nordic walking compared with walking at the same speed. Unlike other forms of fitness walking, the upper body muscular involvement in using the poles directly contributes to forward propulsion. With the effort of movement spread across a greater muscle area, virtually all clients in a normal Nordic walking class situation report that they walk faster than they normally would yet claim that the perceived effort is lower than were they to be walking without poles. The Church et al. (2002) study showed the increased energy expenditure comes without a significant increase in perceived exertion (RPE). Noting this lowered RPE in Nordic walking, Jordan et al. (2001) instructed subjects to walk and Nordic walk at a consistent pace comparative to an aerobic workout. Although subjective, in this more practical setting subjects travelled 16% faster with poles than without, resulting in a whopping 64% increase in energy expenditure.

These specific cardiovascular benefits are extremely attractive to the fitness enthusiast and more conditioned athlete either for effective and well-balanced cross training or to incorporate Nordic walking within lower limb rehabilitation. Sports physiotherapists and experienced personal trainers have quickly recognised that the cross-body action of Nordic walking applies tension through the fascial sling passing from the latissimus muscle on one side, across the thoracolumbar fascia, to the gluteals on the other, and hence aids lumbar stability. Dr Richard Steadman, the US knee surgeon credited with saving Alan

Shearer's career praises Nordic walking for its exercise benefits "particularly for those with early-to-advanced degenerative joint disease or those rehabilitating from surgery".



**Rehabilitation work**

While the benefits to athlete rehabilitation are significant, it is within the exercise referral arena that Nordic walking has a significant role to play. As an activity that is cheap to set up and can be delivered to multiple clients, Nordic walking has been incorporated into the cardiac rehabilitation and COPD rehabilitation programmes of a number of PCTs. As early as 1996, Walter et al. demonstrated that use of walking poles can safely increase the intensity of walking exercise in Phase III / IV cardiac rehabilitation patients. Evidence is growing now for Nordic walking as an effective intervention in other medical conditions as wide ranging as Parkinson's disease (Baatile et al, 2000; van Eijkeren et al, 2008), and breast cancer treatment (Sprod et al, 2005). Oakley et al. (2008) from Sheffield Vascular Institute concluded that Nordic walking immediately (from the very first session!) enables patients with intermittent claudication to walk further with less pain, despite a higher workload. Global experts have suggested that further research here has the potential to change the way the NHS treats this condition. Overall, there is lack of substantial large group trials over longer timeframes reflecting that Nordic walking is only 12 years' old globally. Current, ongoing research in three UK universities, however, would indicate that the future is very bright indeed.

**The benefits of Nordic walking**

Two of the greatest benefits of Nordic walking are the simplest yet possibly the most profound.

1. Nordic walking is an outdoor activity and a third of UK Adults prefer to exercise outdoors, (Mintel)
2. Participants can choose to get into their own personal rhythm ("into the zone") or chat while they exercise both of which

"The specific cardiovascular benefits are extremely attractive to the fitness enthusiast and more conditioned athlete"

have positive mental effects. Numerous studies (see [whi.org.uk](http://whi.org.uk)) provide evidence that exercising outdoors generally leads to increased activity levels, has a positive effect on mood, reduces stress levels and increases the opportunity for social interaction. A strong positive relationship has been shown between better health and access to green space and involvement in one's community (Takano et al, 2002).

As well as increasing scientific research into its benefits and increasing availability Nordic walking is growing in popularity. It's an instant hit with almost all who try it and with a growing trend for more a more varied and open approach to exercise we think it's a discipline that will carry on growing for years to come.

**More information**

Visit [www.nordicwalking.co.uk](http://www.nordicwalking.co.uk) or call 0845 260 9339.

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**THE AUTHOR**

**Martin Christie introduced Nordic walking to the UK in 2003 and developed the UK's first instructor training programme. He is lead tutor for Nordic Walking UK, an organisation which has trained over 750 instructors. Martin is presenting at the WRIGHT Foundation Exercise Referral, Rehab and Activity Conference at LIW 2009.**



**ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ONLINE TO EARN CPD POINTS**

- Q1** What percentage of muscles are used during a Nordic walking session - is it? a) 50 % b) 70 % c) 90 %
- Q2** When walking with poles what increase in energy expenditure did participants experience- was it? a) 64 % b) 76 % c) 88 %
- Q3** What body action has been found to be the reasons for Nordic walking's health benefits - is it? a) Cross-body action b) Bi-lateral swing c) Lumbar curve