

Step on it

How walking can keep you younger for longer

*It's the simplest form of fitness. Now many experts think it's the best. Walking is good for your brain, your heart and your mood. **Peta Bee** explains why a daily walk is the best thing you can do for your health.*

It almost sounds too easy: the simple act of walking will make you healthier and add years to your life. Yet a wealth of new research is now saying just this. That the single most important thing you can do to improve your longevity is to move more — and the best way to do that is to walk.



One study, published last month, found that even just half an hour a day of moderate - paced walking can cut the risk of a fatal heart attack by half. Another six-year study, concluded earlier this year, found that walking is just as good as running for reducing high blood pressure and cholesterol and for fighting heart disease. Some experts say it is even better. Research is also showing how

walking can help to protect against type 2 diabetes, arthritis, depression, memory loss and even Alzheimer's. It's also the best way to combat the negative effects found to be emerging from our increasingly sedentary lifestyles.



In the most recent study, presented to the European Society of Cardiology (ESC) Congress, Finnish researchers reported that people aged between 65 and 74 who walked for four hours a week cut their risk of dying from a heart condition by 54 per cent.



Riitta Antikainen, professor of geriatrics at the University of Oulu, who led the 12-year study, said that walking is "protective even if you have other risk factors for cardiovascular disease such as high cholesterol". The second study was conducted by researchers at the University of California's Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. They analysed 33,060 runners in the National Runners' Health Study and 15,045 walkers in the National Walkers' Health Study. They found that brisk walking and running resulted in similar reductions in risk for high blood pressure, high cholesterol and possibly coronary heart disease. The more people walked or ran each week during the six-year study, the greater the benefits to their cardiovascular system. Overall, for the same

amount of energy used, walkers experienced greater health benefits than runners. Last year, another study showed that people who walked a lot had lower BMIs and smaller waists than those

who took part in more vigorous activities such as jogging.

Type 2 diabetes affects 2.7 million people in the UK. The risk of this can be slashed by up to 30 per cent by walking for only 30 minutes daily, according to data from the Harvard Nurses' Health Study. And there is a reason why many of us instinctively feel the need to take a stroll or walk the dog after a large meal. A trial on a group of older people at George Washington University found that the act of walking after eating (when blood sugar levels can rise significantly) helped to control blood glucose levels for a full 24 hours. Poor blood sugar control is a key risk factor for diabetes in the long term.

Other recently published papers have shown how walking can offset many of the negative side-effects of ageing. Researchers at Boston University found that walking 6,000 steps, or three miles, a day could improve knee arthritis by helping to build muscle strength and flexibility, and also reduce arthritic pain. The paper's author also found that even those who walked very little could improve their health by making a bit more effort to get out of the house. For someone with knee arthritis, who walks very little, walking only 3,000 steps a day, or 1.5 miles, can lead to improvements, says Daniel White, a research assistant professor in the department of physical therapy and athletic training. "The more walking one does, the less risk of developing functioning difficulties."

While walking has always had healthy benefits, adding a stroll to our daily routine is more important than ever. As our life-styles become ever more sedentary, research is increasingly showing how bad this is for our longevity. Some scientists are now saying that the modern culture of sitting at a desk all day is as detrimental to health as smoking and drinking excessively. In a study by the University of Cambridge this year, scientists found that workers who barely moved from their desks for eight hours were 60 per cent more likely to die prematurely.

Walking is emerging as a potent weapon. "It's the best form of defence we have against the onslaught of sedentarism," says Greg Whyte, professor of applied sport and exercise science at Liverpool John Moores University. "Recent data has shown how substituting one hour of sitting with one hour of walking results in a 13 per cent drop in all-cause mortality. You live longer, in other words."

Indeed, only 25 minutes of brisk walking a day could add up to seven years to your life, experts claimed in research presented at the European Society of Cardiology congress last year. Sanjay Sharma, the professor of inherited cardiac diseases in sports cardiology at St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, said it could halve the risk of heart attack death among those in their fifties and sixties. "When you exercise moderately, you reduce your risk of dying from a heart attack when you're in your fifties and sixties by 50 per cent"

So what is it about walking that makes it so effective? Certainly, it helps to shred fat by burning calories at an average rate of 88 per mile at a moderate pace (more if you move faster). It helps to strengthen muscles in the legs, buttocks and core. As you walk, the force of each stride stresses bones in a positive way so that bone cells respond by creating more tissue and strengthening the skeleton. Also it is obviously something our bodies are designed to do.

Stephen Zwolinsky, a researcher in the Centre for Active Lifestyles at Leeds Beckett University, says. "Anthropologically, humans are designed to solve problems while walking for up to 14 hours per day," Zwolinsky says. "Yet many people spend almost that amount of time sitting instead. And this seems to be a growing issue as we age."

Surveys by the Department for Transport show the average person now walks 181 miles a year —

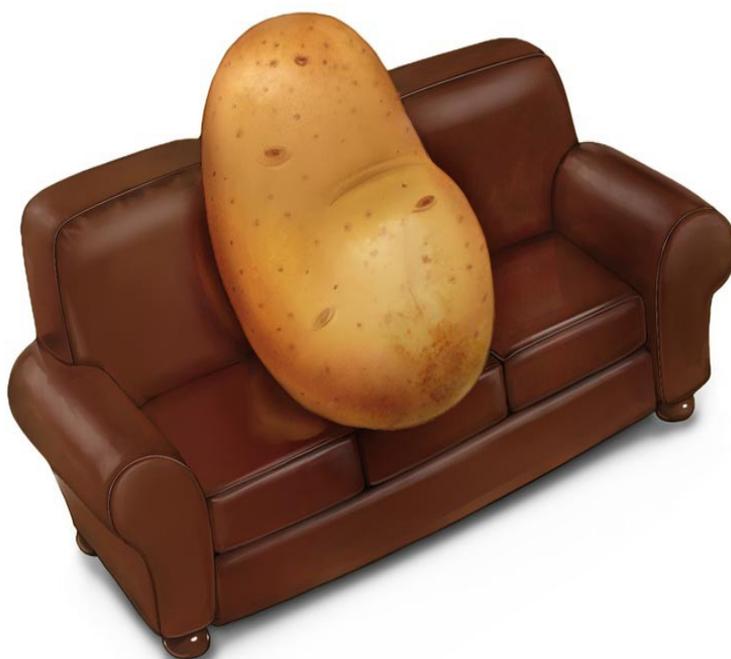
less than half a mile a day and a drop of 63 miles since 1986.

It is not just our bodies that respond with remarkable effect. A regular walk three times a week has been shown to increase the size of brain regions linked to planning and memory over the course of a year. Thus it helps to slow the brain shrinkage and weakening mental skills that occur as we age. Neurologists at the University of Miami recently suggested that people who don't walk or do some form of light exercise experience a cognitive decline equivalent to ten more years of ageing compared with those who are active. Others have shown how walking for at least six miles a week may protect brain size and, in turn, preserve memory in old age.

The speed at which people can walk in old age has been shown to be a determining factor in detecting Alzheimer's disease. Researchers at the University Hospital Toulouse found an association between the slow walking speed of elderly people and a build-up of plaque associated with the disease in several areas of the brain. Those who walked at an average pace (3.48 feet per second) or faster were less likely to have the disease hallmark. "The mental benefits of walking are phenomenal," says Whyte. "There is so much proof that walking outdoors improves mood and helps alleviate mild depression by helping to balance brain chemicals."

So if we want to increase the amount of walking we do, where should we start? Recently, 10,000 daily steps have been widely touted as the goal to aim for, but Whyte says it is better to work to individual goals. Indeed, a new study showed how fitness trackers can distract users from their weight loss goals as they become overly dependent on the devices. The key, say experts, is to set your own limits. Walking 10,000 steps— or about five miles — is too much of a leap if you do nothing at present, so build up gradually. The idea of a 10,000-steps tally first became popular in the 1970s and is not based on any scientific evidence. It's almost certainly not enough for most people.

"If it's your main activity, you need to be doing a few more steps or miles each week," Whyte says. Findings from a study involving 3,127 adult volunteers and 14 researchers from the US, Canada, Sweden and France, suggested 11,000-12,000 was a more appropriate target for most people.



Turn your walk into a workout

Try adding 30-second or one-minute bursts of fast walking. "You will naturally get faster as you get aerobically fitter," says Greg Whyte, professor of applied sport and exercise science at Liverpool John Moores University. That, in itself, can pay dividends because your body will move more efficiently, enabling you to keep going for longer without getting out of breath.

Adding hills to the walking equation will take the intensity up several notches. Calorie-burn can increase by as much as 60 per cent compared with walking on flat ground and it is likely you will burn at least 140 calories per undulating mile. What's more, hills provide resistance and will strengthen muscles everywhere, particularly in the buttocks and legs.

Build up to 5 miles (around 90 minutes or 10,000 steps) of moderate walking and then progress from there. The longer you keep it up and the more you do, the more pronounced the health benefits of walking.

"This is key," says Whyte. "You need incremental increases in time, distance or intensity so that it makes you work harder over time. You want to avoid hitting a fitness plateau. Mix up your walking, adding more variety to challenge yourself. The harder you walk, the less distance or number of steps you need to take to reap the benefits of walking."