

Power steps: Why walking is the best exercise at any age

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Research shows that we are all walking less than ever - and it is damaging our health.

Peta Bee explains why we need to take at least 10,000 steps a day!

We are not walking enough to rake in the medical benefits

It's a fast route to fitness; it costs nothing and is by far the easiest exercise to slot into the day. Yet the latest figures show that we are walking less than ever. Exercise psychologists at Edinburgh University have discovered that we cover 80 miles less a year on foot than we did a decade ago. Despite recommendations that we should amass at least 10,000 - 12,000 steps a day through walking just to stay healthy and even more (up to 15,000) to lose weight - most of us manage a paltry 3,000-4,000 a day.



This needs to change.

Research shows conclusively that walking has huge benefits for our health, whatever our age. It has been shown to reduce cancer death risk by up to 34 per cent and cut the risk of type 2 diabetes in half. Regular brisk walking can lower our risk of high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes as much as running can, according to a six-year

study published in the American Heart Association's journal *Arteriosclerosis, Thrombosis and Vascular Biology*. It is also weight-bearing and thus lowers the risk of osteoporosis by helping to strengthen bones that begin to lose mass as we age. And it's kinder to joints: studies at the University of Wisconsin have shown that, compared with running, even a vigorous walk reduces the impact on vulnerable hips, ankles and knees by 26 per cent. Last year, research reported in *The Lancet* found that adding 2,000 moderately paced walking steps (or 20 minutes) a day to regular activity could help people to cut their risk of heart attacks and strokes by 8 per cent. Doing 4,000 more steps (40 minutes of added walking), matches the gains obtained from taking cholesterol-lowering drugs. "It reduces your cardiovascular risk by about 16-20 per cent, which is the equivalent of taking a statin," says Dr Thomas Yates, of the Diabetes Research Centre at the University of Leicester. "However, a statin has side-effects and only reduces cholesterol. Walking has a much bigger range of health benefits."

For optimum general fitness, try to walk for 20 to 30 minutes a day, in addition to general household chores; try walking to the shops or getting off your bus a stop early. As well as the physical benefits, walking can improve thinking skills and boost creativity. Stanford University psychologists asked volunteers to walk on a treadmill in a room that contained nothing except a

desk. Before and during the exercise they completed tests of creativity. In almost every case, their creativity increased by about 60 per cent.

What about fitness and weight loss?

Could walking even improve fitness and help you to lose weight in the way that, say, running can? Yes, if you do it properly, says Dean Hodgkin, a leading trainer who holds fitness walking camps at the Ragdale Hall health spa in Leicestershire. "You can replicate all of the training methods used for running such as intervals and sprints on a walk."

Including hills is a great way to inject intensity. "By pushing your body up an incline you are subjecting it to a form of resistance training, working muscles much harder than when they are pushed on the flat," Hodgkin says.

Personal trainers have embraced walking. Dalton Wong, trainer to Jennifer Lawrence and Amanda Seyfried, is a big fan. "Getting fit no longer means getting to a gym," he says. "You can build walking into your day if you don't have time to spend an hour doing a specific workout. Go with the dog or with the kids; Walk to work or to school."



Fitness trainer Matt Roberts now holds Nordic Walking sessions in London parks for his clients and says it "works the chest, back, arms, shoulders and legs" more than you would normally. Once considered naff (the idea is to hike through the urban jungle with two ski poles, no snow), Nordic Walking has been shown, through numerous studies, to provide fitness benefits far beyond a normal stroll.

Of course you don't need poles, or indeed any other expensive equipment. A comfortable pair of trainers or shoes is all that's needed. Walking can become part of your routine wherever you live: research has shown that city dwellers tend to walk 15 minutes a day more than suburbanites because they leave their cars at home. Walking gives you a huge fat-burning advantage. Twenty minutes of walking - about 2,000 steps, or about a mile - burns about 100 calories. If you do it daily, eat healthily, and you could lose 10lb in one year.

Do I have to walk quickly to be fit?

"Any fitness regimen should be progressive. With walking, the idea is to get faster as you become fitter so that you cover a greater distance in less time," Hodgkin says.



If you're using walking as a serious fitness tool, then the speed you walk determines how much energy you will burn: the faster you move, the greater the calorie-gobbling. In half an hour, a 9.5 stone person will use 75 calories on a 2mph stroll; this rises to 99 if the pace is increased to 3mph and to 150 calories if it is increased to 4mph. "It doesn't need to be flat out all the way," Hodgkin says. "Interval style walking, in which you walk fast for 30-60 seconds, slow down to

recover, and then repeat the burst, is extremely effective at improving cardiovascular fitness and boosting your metabolism very quickly."

How far do I need to walk to be healthy?

Guidelines suggest we should aim for 10,000 steps a day (about five miles), but while 10,000 steps is a reasonable goal, it isn't set in stone. "Going from very few steps to that would be too much of a jump," Hodgkin says. "Somewhere in between - about 6,000 - is a good target for beginners." You don't need to accomplish it in one go. Ten minutes of walking around - doing the housework and shopping - will easily see you amass 1,000 steps or half a mile.



As you get fitter, set your daily, distance targets higher. Some experts believe that even 10,000 daily steps is not enough, especially if your aim is to lose weight rather than keep it stable. A few years ago, Professor Anders Raustorp, from the University of Kalmar in Sweden, published findings based on a study involving

researchers from 14 countries and 3,127 adult volunteers. Looking at the weight and body mass index (BMI) of the participants he suggested that for women under 50 and all men, 10,000 steps is not enough to help control weight.

Instead, Raustorp said, women aged 18-40 should aim for 12,000 steps and those aged 40-50 for 11,000. For men, the goal should be 12,000 if aged 18-50 and 11,000 beyond that age. Previous research by the same team recommended that girls aged 6-12 should accumulate 1,200 steps a day and boys 1,500. Setting goals and keeping a journal led to a 27 per cent activity rise over four months.

It's useful to think in practical terms of what the steps and distance means in terms of calories burnt: someone weighing 70kg would use around 440 calories covering 10,000 daily steps. To lose weight you need to use up around 600 more calories than you consume every day.

Why your posture matters



Leading trainer Dean Hodgkin says it is vital to master your walking technique before you push yourself any harder. "Walking is low impact and it's difficult to injure yourself when doing it at a steady pace," he says: "But your posture changes when you pick up speed if you haven't got a solid walking technique, so it's important to get it right." Walk at a comfortable pace and focus on your posture, relaxing your shoulders down and swinging your arms in rhythm with your stride. When you take your walk up to a more brisk pace, avoid swinging the arms side to side like windscreen wipers, but keep your elbows close to your body and concentrate on a forward-backward movement. Your legs

should not be straight as the aim is to produce a smooth motion and a locked knee can cause a bobbing or bouncing action that increases the risk or damage. You should increase your forward lean slightly, but from your ankles and not the waist, as this could lead to backache.

If you are using speed/power walking as a fitness technique with high intensity training-style spurts, concentrate on increasing stride frequency, not stride length, and pumping your arms. On contact, exaggerate the lift of the toes and move smoothly from the heel to the ball of the foot in a continuous rolling motion and add a strong push off your big toe. To help increase speed, narrow your stride width a little, like walking on a tightrope rather than tram lines, Again, lean forwards from your ankles.

Why you Should climb stairs every day

The American Lung Foundation says that fast stair-walking provides the same benefits in 15 minutes as you would obtain from walking or jogging slowly for twice as long on flat ground.



There are countless proven benefits. Climbing stairs for an average six minutes a day led to a 15 per cent drop in cholesterol and a 10-15 per cent increase in fitness after eight weeks, one study at the University of Ulster found (six minutes isn't as much as you think if you factor in climbing the escalator on your

commute, or the stairs at work). It is also among the best bottom and leg-toning activities around. Taking stairs one at a time is better than bounding up them when it comes to weight loss. Scientists from the University of Roehampton found climbing five flights of stairs five times a week - an ascent of about 15 m burnt an average of 302 calories if the stairs were taken one at a time, but only 260 if two stairs were taken at a time, probably because it takes less time.

Use good technique: make sure that your whole foot lands on each step, to avoid straining the Achilles tendon at the back of the legs - and walk (don't run) downstairs.

Best exercise for over 60s.



There are countless reasons why walking remains the perfect exercise well into old age. As little as 30 minutes a day helps to prevent arthritis and disability. "People with or at risk of knee arthritis should be walking 6,000 steps a day and the more walking one does, the less risk there is of developing functioning difficulties," says Professor Daniel White of Boston University. Every step throughout the day counts. "People usually average 100 steps a minute while they walk, so 6,000 is roughly walking for an hour," White

says. Beginners or those with knee problems should aim for 3,000 steps. Research by Dr Marco Pahor of the Institute of Ageing in Florida has showed how 150 minutes of walking a week resulted in 18 per cent fewer episodes of disability in a group of elderly patients. They were also 28 per cent less likely to become permanently disabled if they walked regularly.

And what does it all mean?

1 mile brisk walking = 1 Mars bar

1 mile stroll = a small caramel latte

1 mile hilly walk = half a large ham and mushroom pizza

1 mile speedy walking = a prawn and mayonnaise sandwich

1 mile steady pace = a packet of Kettle chips

What does walking do for your medical state?

Reduce cancer death risk by up to 34%

Cut the risk of type 2 diabetes in half

Brisk walking lowers high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes

Lowers the risk of osteoporosis

Cut their risk of heart attacks and strokes by 8 per cent

4,000 more steps, matches the gains obtained from cholesterol-lowering drugs - don't bother with statin...

Increase your creativity by 60 per cent

Calorie drop

An hour walk by a 9.5 stone (60kg) person

2mph - 150 calories

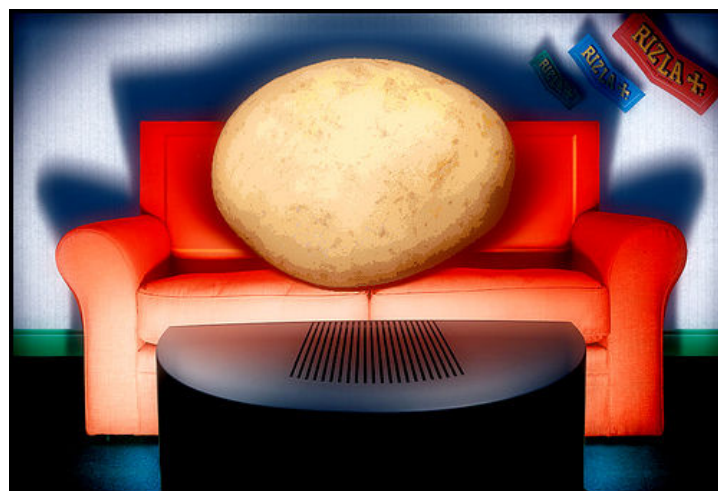
3mph - 200 calories

4mph - 300 calories

Some metrics to remember

1,000 steps - 800m or 0.5 miles - 10 minutes

10,000 steps - 8km or 5 miles - 1.5 hours



AVOID...